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THE STRANGE STORY  
OF LONDON'S FROZEN  
CHICKEN GHOST

SKEPTICAL SCOURGE 'THE AMAZING' RANDI REMEMBERED

THE PURLOINED PENIS WHO STOLE GERMANY'S GIANT PHALLUS?

TOIL AND TROUBLE WHAT DO WITCHES DO IN LOCKDOWN?

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THE WORLD OF

STRANGE PHENOMENA

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ENCOUNTERS ON  
THE ROADS OF  
LINCOLNSHIRE

THE MEDIUM IS  
THE MESSAGE

BRITAIN'S FEMALE  
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DARK KNIGHT  
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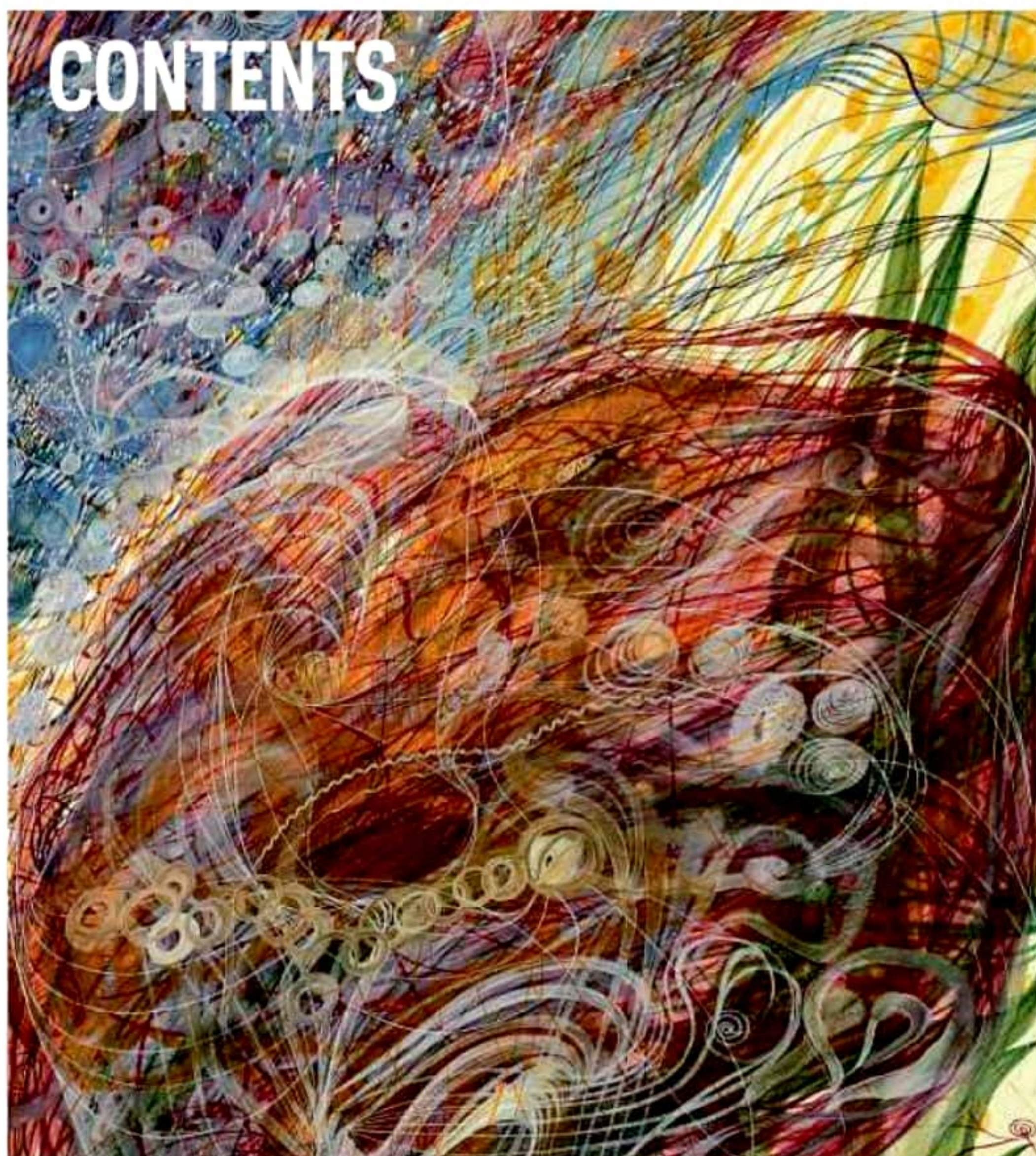
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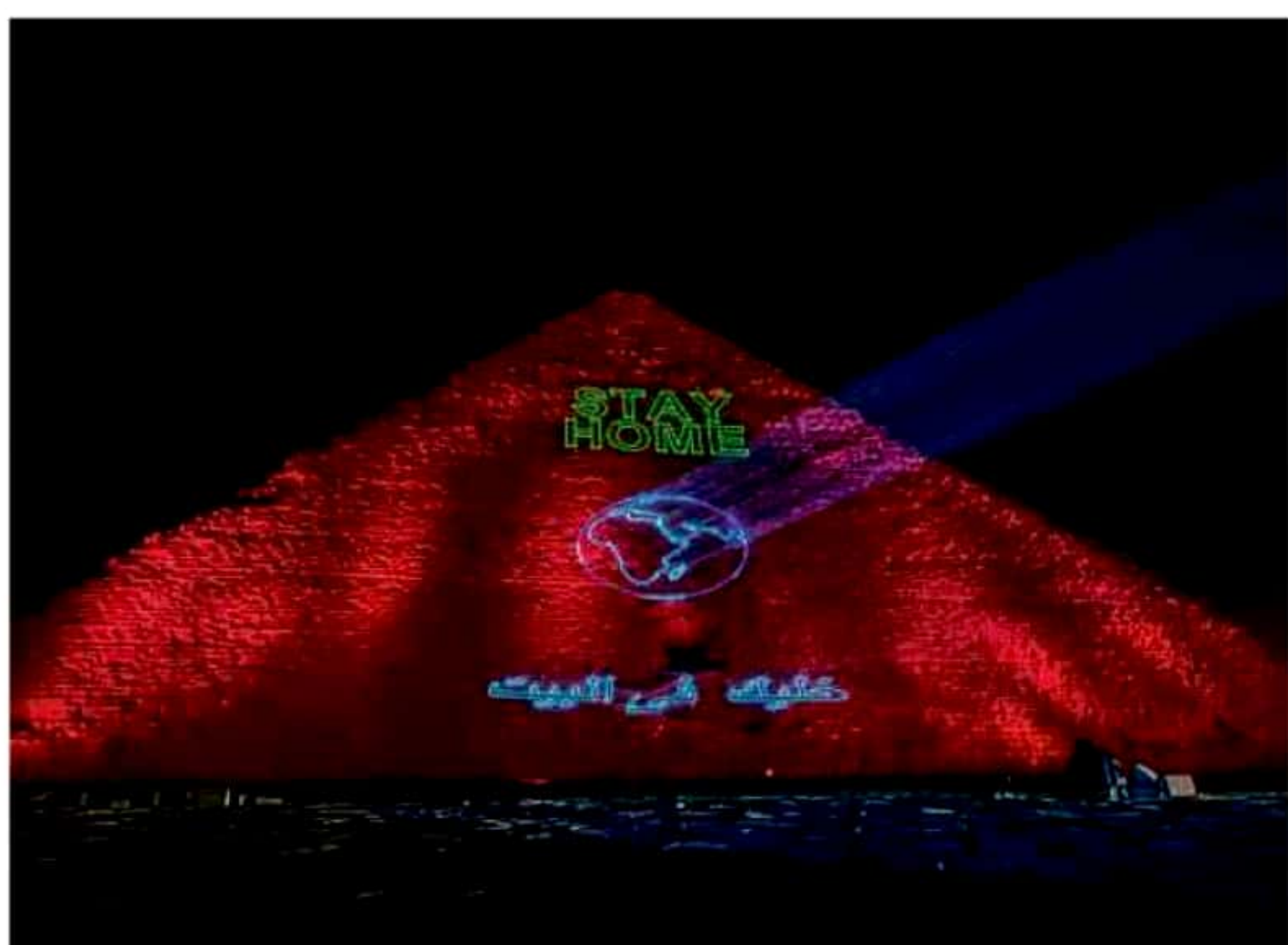
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**EDITOR**  
DAVID SUTTON  
drsutton@forteantimes.com

**FOUNDING EDITORS**  
BOB RICKARD (ft-bobrickard@mail.com)  
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteantimes.com)

**NEWS EDITOR**  
CHRISTOPHER JOSIFFE (csjosiffe@forteantimes.com)

**ART DIRECTOR**  
ETIENNE GILFILLAN (etienne@forteantimes.com)

**BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR**  
DAVID V BARRETT (dvbarrett@forteantimes.com)

**EDITORIAL ASSISTANT**  
ABIGAIL MASON

**RESIDENT CARTOONIST**  
HUNT EMERSON

**SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES AND BACK ISSUES**  
www.managemymags.co.uk  
customercare@subscribe.forteantimes.com

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Other overseas subscriptions: +44 (0)330 333 9492

**LICENSING & SYNDICATION**  
FORTEAN TIMES IS AVAILABLE FOR INTERNATIONAL LICENSING AND SYNDICATION – CONTACT:  
Senior Group Licensing Manager  
CARLOTTA SERANTONI TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 3840  
carlotta\_serantoni@dennis.co.uk  
Licensing Content Manager  
NICOLE CREASEY TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 3998  
nicole\_creasey@dennis.co.uk

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**MD SPECIALIST DIVISION**  
DHARMESH MISTRY  
dharmesh\_mistry@  
dennis.co.uk

**NEWSTRADE DIRECTOR**  
DAVID BARKER  
david\_barker@dennis.co.uk

**FOREIGN SALES**  
hello@marketforce.co.uk

**SENIOR NETWORK  
PRODUCTION MANAGER**  
LAWRENCE BROOKES  
lawrence\_brookes@  
dennis.co.uk

**GROUP ADVERTISING  
DIRECTOR SPECIALIST**  
ANDREA MASON  
020 3890 3814  
andrea\_mason@  
dennis.co.uk

**ADVERTISING DIRECTOR**  
HELEN RUANE  
020 3890 3899  
helen\_ruane@  
dennis.co.uk

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# EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

## STRANGE FENOMENA AND MORE

Welcome to our first issue of 2021, in which you'll find plentiful and wide-ranging weirdness to greet the new year, including the first in a brand new series examining the mysteries of Lincolnshire, starting with the strange story of 'The Ruskington Horror' (p32). Could Lincolnshire prove to be not just the flattest but the weirdest of English counties? Over the coming months, in the company of intrepid road ghost hunter Rob Gandy, we hope to find out. Elsewhere, there's an artistic theme to the issue: Robert Weinberg hails the work of Britain's female Spiritualist artists (p40), Jeffrey Vallance invokes the ghost of the world's first frozen chicken and explains its relationship with his own artistic projects (p46), and the Hierophant's Apprentice goes in search of Van Gogh's ear (p52). Meanwhile, SD Tucker travels the Silk Road in search of strange 'Stans (p48), and, with much of the world facing lockdowns and restrictions caused by the ongoing pandemic, Lisa Gledhill presents a timely guide to fortean travel of the online variety, highlighting some of her favourite virtual destinations (p74).

### WEIRDNESS POSTPONED

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that pretty much everything is now 'subject to change'. Bearing that in mind, Rob Gandy is attempting to keep track of fortean events cancelled in 2020 and rescheduled for a later date. Rob will try to provide us with the most current information on revised dates, so if you have a fortean event you'd like us to flag, please email him at rob.gandy@ntlworld.com. Here is the latest:

### LAPIS WORLDWIDE SKYWATCH

Here's one event that – unless forestalled by an alien invasion – will be going ahead on 16 January: a worldwide, socially distanced skywatch organised by LAPIS (Lancashire Anomalous Phenomena Investigation Society). Full details at www.lapisparanormal.com/skywatch.

### LAPIS CONFERENCE 2021

The 2020 LAPIS Conference was another casualty of Covid-19, and the organisation is now looking at a 2021 Conference provisionally scheduled for October 2021 and with tickets at £45/£25. Keep up to date at www.lapisparanormal.com/.

### HIDDEN CHARMS 3

This bi-annual conference on magical house protection and related issues was originally

scheduled for April 2020 but will now be taking place on Saturday 2 October 2021 at St Mary's Creative Space in Chester. Tickets will cost £40. Full details at <http://www.apotropaios.co.uk/conference-2021.html>.

### WEIRD WEEKEND NORTH

The popular two-day event covering a wide range of fortean topics has now decided to sit out the uncertainties of 2021, returning instead with a "bigger and better" event over three days in 2022. It's currently scheduled for the Bank Holiday weekend of 30 April-2 May 2022. Full details at <https://www.weirdweekendnorth.com/>.

Other regular events, such as the monthly meetings of the Ghost Club (members only; you can join at [https://www.ghostclub.org.uk/gc\\_contact\\_main.htm](https://www.ghostclub.org.uk/gc_contact_main.htm)) and the Edinburgh Fortean Society (<http://andoria.co.uk/wordpress/>) remain online for now.

### DREAMS, DEATH AND PLAGIARISM

It has been brought to our attention that an article by Dr Alejandro Parra, "Dreams, Death and Spirituality", published in FT398 (Nov 2020), was to a large and shocking extent a work of plagiarism. The article, which derives from a chapter in Parra's 2019 book *The Last Farewell Embrace*, is full of unacknowledged borrowings, elements cut and pasted from other people's research papers and even the false attribution of interviewee testimony from other projects to his own survey of Argentinian hospital staff. What's more, Dr Parra appears to have done exactly the same thing in an article published in our friend and colleague Patrick Huyghe's *EdgeScience* magazine. We still await an explanation and apology from Dr Parra, but would like to acknowledge those whose work he has plagiarised – including Brayne et al (2008), Fenwick et al (2010) and Nosek et al (2014) – and to thank the individuals who helped make us aware of this unpleasant episode.

## NEW ADDRESS FOR FT NEWS CLIPPINGS

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## Something STRANGE

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

# STRANGE DAYS

## MYSTERY OF THE MONOLITHS

Enigmatic obelisks pop up around the world, from Utah to Romania

Utah officials were puzzled when they caught sight of a mysterious monolith in a remote canyon, while counting bighorn sheep by helicopter in mid-November 2020. Wildlife Resources officers aboard a Utah Department of Public Safety helicopter spotted the steely, triangular 10-12ft (3-3.5 metre) tall monolith, situated at the bottom of an isolated sandstone gulch.

"During the counts we came across this, in the middle of nowhere, buried deep in the rock," the Department's Instagram post read. "Inquiring minds want to know, what the heck is it? Anyone?"

Pilot Bret Hutchings described how one of the biologists first spotted the anomalous object as they flew directly over the top of it, quite by chance. "He was like, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa, turn around, turn around!' And I was like, 'what'. And he's like, 'There's this thing back there - we've got to go look at it!'"

Hutchings initially speculated the obelisk could be some kind of NASA navigational device, but subsequently thought it more likely that the artefact had been installed as an art project. Either way, it is hard not to make comparisons with the iconic monolith in the opening sequence of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, (see FT332:32-38) in which a group of hominids from our prehistoric past encounter a similar monolith for the first time.

Hutchings refused to give details of the monolith's precise location, for fear of curiosity-seekers injuring or otherwise endangering themselves while



ABOVE: A Wildlife Resources officer examines the mysterious monolith spotted by helicopter in a remote Utah canyon. BELOW: The monolith's Romanian cousin.

trying to find it. But Reddit Internet sleuths managed to pinpoint its approximate coordinates, and then consulted archived Google Earth pages, enabling them to establish when it first appeared (see p16). It seems the monolith first arrived sometime between August 2015 and October 2016. Roughly around this time, the TV sci-fi drama *Westworld* was being filmed nearby, so it is assumed that one of the crew either didn't pack up the set's props when filming had finished, or deliberately used the metal as a Kubrick-inspired prank.

The mystery monolith has now disappeared. A Bureau of Land Management (BLM) statement confirmed that the "illegally installed structure, referred to as the 'monolith' has been removed from BLM public lands by an unknown party," adding: "The BLM did not remove the structure which is considered private property." Video footage



apparently filmed on a mobile phone later emerged, showing several persons taking down the monolith and carrying it away – but who were they?

And in California, another monolith that had appeared on a mountain near the town of Atascadero shortly after the discovery of the Utah artefact, which it resembled, has been torn down. A group of young men claiming to be Christians posted a video of themselves

replacing the monolith with a cross while chanting "Christ is king!" During the video, they make offensive comments and knock back energy drinks, while referencing Donald Trump and the QAnon conspiracy theory, proclaiming their mission to demonstrate "how much we love Jesus Christ".

Atascadero's mayor Heather Moreno expressed her anger at their actions: "We are upset that these young men felt the need to drive five hours to come into our community and vandalise the monolith, [which] was something unique and fun in an otherwise stressful time."

Strangely, less than two weeks after the discovery of the Utah monolith, a similar mystery structure was found in Romania. It, too, is reported to have gone missing. The 13ft-tall (4m) Romanian monolith was found on Batca Doamnei Hill in the city of Piatra Neam in northeastern Romania, close to the remains of the Petrodava Dacian Fortress, an ancient defensive structure believed to have been destroyed by the Romans in the second century AD. It was made of dark metal and covered in what appeared to be a series of scribbled circles.

"We have started looking into the strange appearance of the monolith," said Rocsana Josanu of the Neamt Culture and Heritage Department. "It is on private property, but we still don't know who the monolith's owner is yet. It is in a protected area on an archaeological site," she said, adding: "Before installing something there, they needed permission from our institution, one that must then be approved by the Ministry of Culture." [huffingtonpost.co.uk](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2020/11/23/romanian-monolith/), 23 Nov; [cnet.com](https://www.cnet.com/2020/11/28/romanian-monolith/), 28 Nov; [BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/2020/11/201129-romanian-monolith), 29 Nov; [yahoo.com](https://www.yahoo.com/news/2020/12/01/romanian-monolith/), 1 Dec; [D. Telegraph](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/2020/12/04/romanian-monolith/), 4 Dec 2020.





## CHRISTMAS STOWAWAYS

NYC's Rocky the owl, plus a cheeky koala

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## PENNIES FROM HEAVEN

Coffin maker's million-dollar meteorite

PAGE 15



## OUR LADY OF THE LAY-BY

A mystery Madonna on the motorway

PAGE 26

# THE CASE OF THE PURLOINED PENIS

Giant phallus vanishes, while Cwmdonkin's naughty mushrooms get axed



ABOVE: The two-metre wooden phallus being enjoyed by hikers. BELOW: Some of the "offensive" mushrooms in a Swansea park.

### GERMAN PHALLUS MYSTERY

A two-metre (7ft) wooden phallus situated on a German mountainside has mysteriously disappeared, prompting a police investigation. Officers in the Bavarian town of Kempten are leading the probe, although it is not yet clear whether a crime has been committed. Only a pile of sawdust remains where the sculpture once proudly stood. It appeared on the 1,738m (5,702ft) high Gruenten mountain some years ago, and had attained celebrity status as a destination for hikers, even appearing on Google Maps as a 'cultural monument'. It is rumoured among locals to have been a prank birthday gift for a young man whose family didn't appreciate the joke, and so the 200kg (440lb) sculpture was hauled up the mountain and left there.

Days after its disappearance, a similar wooden carving appeared in its place. The replacement phallus is slightly larger and is propped up with

wooden beams. *Independent*, 1 Dec; [AP], 3 Dec 2020.

### NAUGHTY MUSHROOMS

Meanwhile in Wales, a number of wooden carved mushrooms have been removed from a Swansea park after complaints that they looked 'offensive'. The mushroom carvings have been on show in Swansea's Cwmdonkin Park for at least a year, but several have now been taken down following an objection lodged with Swansea Council, although it is not clear how many complaints had been received. The carvings' removal has been controversial. Local resident Paul Durden (co-writer of the cult 1990s film *Twin Town* set in Swansea) said: "The one or two people who complained need to grow up. It's a travesty of justice. Surely you should always name the people who



complain?" Local councillor Peter May was quoted as saying: "The council's parks department has responded to complaints received about the mushroom carvings. I think clearly, this is an issue that has divided the community".

Cwmdonkin Park is famous for its association with Dylan Thomas and features a bust of the writer who used to play there as a child. *walesonline.co.uk*, 17 Nov; *Independent*, 1 Dec; [AP] 3 Dec 2020.

## EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

### ESCAPED CLONED FEMALE MUTANT CRAYFISH TAKE OVER BELGIAN CEMETERY

telegraph.co.uk, 23 Oct 2020.

### Denmark's culled minks rise from mass grave

thejournal.ie, 26 Nov 2020.

### PEOPLE TURN TO CUSTARD AND GRAVY AMID THE PANDEMIC

BBC News, 10 Nov 2020.

### Naughty emus barred from Australian pub

D.Telegraph, 29 July 2020.

### HEAVEN, EARTH AND ARSE TICKS ON A PILGRIMAGE IN DONEGAL

Irish Times, 26 June 2019.

### Shark in steroid scandal

(Queensland) Courier-Mail, 27 May 2020.



## SIDELINES...

### RECYCLED RUBBERS

Police in Vietnam confiscated an estimated 345,000 used condoms which had been cleaned and resold as new. After the raid on a warehouse in the southern province of Binh Duong, police detained a woman who explained that the used prophylactics were first boiled in water then dried and reshaped on a wooden phallus before being repackaged and resold. *thaivisa.com*, 25 Sept 2020.

### MUSICAL MUTT

Gwenda Wilkin, known as "Britain's leading lady accordioniste", died on 6 May 2020 aged 86. She dyed her hair pink, toured with Vera Lynn and Gracie Fields to entertain the troops in the 1940s, and performed on *Workers' Playtime* and Wilfred Pickles's *Have a Go* on the wireless. She often performed with her dog Danny, whom she taught to bark in time to one of Liszt's Hungarian rhapsodies. *D.Telegraph*, 5 Aug 2020.

### GORILLA TACTICS

A man dressed as a gorilla and brandishing a machete was arrested in Fargo, North Dakota. Police arrived at an apartment block around 12.30am after reports of shots having been fired. The supposed gunshots were actually fireworks; the gorilla-costumed man, later identified as Jorden Pickus, 26, had threatened to blow up the building. After evacuating residents, police spoke to Pickus for several hours. He eventually surrendered and was taken to hospital for a mental health evaluation before being arrested and charged with terrorising. *Miami Herald*, 4 Oct 2020.

## COVID CORNER | Elephant seal goes walkabout, covens cope with Covid, and more lockdown lore



ABOVE: An errant elephant seal makes its way through the streets of Puerto Cisnes in Chile after getting a bit lost.

### WANDERING SEAL

A disoriented elephant seal wandered the streets of a Chilean seaport town after taking a wrong turning. Residents of Puerto Cisnes, 1,500km (932 miles) south of the capital Santiago, said they are accustomed to seeing the creatures offshore in the water, but were surprised to see one hauling itself down the middle of a street several blocks from the shore. Witnesses said the seal was not acting aggressively, but appeared confused and frightened. A group of police, navy officers and concerned locals used black tarpaulins to persuade the large animal to turn round and head back towards the sea.

"I was a bit startled to begin with, but because they move slowly, I calmed down and told my son to film it," a local woman told journalists. "I'd never seen one so close up – and certainly never in the middle of town. We see these animals quite far out at sea and so we don't know much about them. You don't know if they're dangerous or if they could attack someone. But what we saw here was that the animal was scared."

Sergeant José Muñoz of the Chilean Navy said the seal had travelled quite a few blocks before being guided back to sea.

*"I'd never seen one close up – and never in the middle of town"*

"I want to thank the community for its huge support," he said, assuring residents that the Navy would be conducting additional patrols to ensure the two-tonne (2,000kg) animal didn't return to town.

Chile's curfew, imposed at the end of March to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, has encouraged various animals to enter now-empty urban areas at night (see **FT392:7**). In recent months, seven cougars (mountain lions) have been captured in Santiago.

Southern elephant seals, found in sub-Antarctic and Antarctic waters, are the largest members of the 32-strong seal family. Males can measure up to six metres (20ft) in length and weigh up to four tonnes (4,000kg), while females can reach lengths of three metres (10ft) and weigh a little less than a tonne (1,000kg). For other recent seal news, see **FT393:8; 391:7**. [*UPI*]; *Guardian*, 7 Oct 2020.

### SPOT THE BALL

In October 2020 a Scottish football match being televised with up-to-the-minute robot camera technology highlighted an unexpected technical hitch. The new Pixellot system with "in-built, AI, ball-tracking technology" employs a robot camera and is used to capture HD footage of all home matches at Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC's stadium. This live footage is then broadcast directly to season-ticket holders' homes while fans are not allowed to attend matches due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Unfortunately, the Pixellot software was unable to distinguish the football from a linesman's bald head, and so the robot camera, programmed to follow the ball, kept panning to the sidelines and missing the action. Many viewers complained they had missed their team scoring a goal. Some even suggested that the club would have to provide the linesman with a toupée or a hat in future. *iflscience.com*, 29 Oct 2020.

### PENNSYLVANIA CANDYPULT

An ingenious Pennsylvania family invented a device allowing them to dispense candy to Trick-Or-Treaters at Hallowe'en while maintaining social distancing. Vince Mak of York County explained







how his family came up with the 'Candypult' – a catapult designed to propel candy from a safe distance – after holding a brainstorming session. "We thought we could try to come up with a creative way to throw candy at kids... safely," he told a local TV station. "With everything going on, everyone just needs to feel happy and find something to laugh at." [UPI] 23 Oct 2020.

## WITCHES' LOCKDOWN WOE

Welsh witches were disappointed this year because of Wales's 17-day 'firebreak' lockdown (pubs, restaurants, hotels and non-essential shops remaining shut, and gatherings of people from more than one household forbidden). This meant that covens were unable to meet at Samhain (Halloween), arguably the most important date in the Wiccan calendar. The lockdown has caused further difficulties for the principality's Pagans.

Karin Rainbird, a freelance psychologist and Pagan prison chaplain, recently helped start a seven-strong Wiccan coven in Pontypridd, but explained that since she's the only initiated member, the others need face-to-face training. "Wicca is not really something you can do online," she said. "Training would be practical. It would be doing the sabbats, having some workshops where we practise casting the circle, identify herbs, that kind of thing."

The 2011 UK census showed as many as 85,000 people identifying with the neo-pagan movement, primarily represented by Wicca and other witchcraft religions, although Heathenry and Vodou practitioners also appeared. Social media has aided the growth in popularity of these religions with younger people, with TikTok's 'Wichtok', Wiccan YouTube influencers and Twitter and Instagram hashtags helping spread the word among Generation Z. BBC News, 31 Oct 2020.

## SELF-ISOLATING SELF-TATTOOIST

After weeks of social distancing and lockdowns, a lot of us are starting to go stir crazy. In some

cases, boredom has driven people to cut their own hair; in other cases, they've done so because they are shielding and unable to leave home, or because hairdressers are closed during lockdown.

Like barbers, tattoo parlours are also deemed non-essential. Chris Woodhead, 33, is a professional tattoo artist who normally works in a London studio. He began tattooing himself each day he was in quarantine during the UK's first lockdown in Spring. At the time of reporting, he was on his 49th day of tattooing with no intention of stopping.

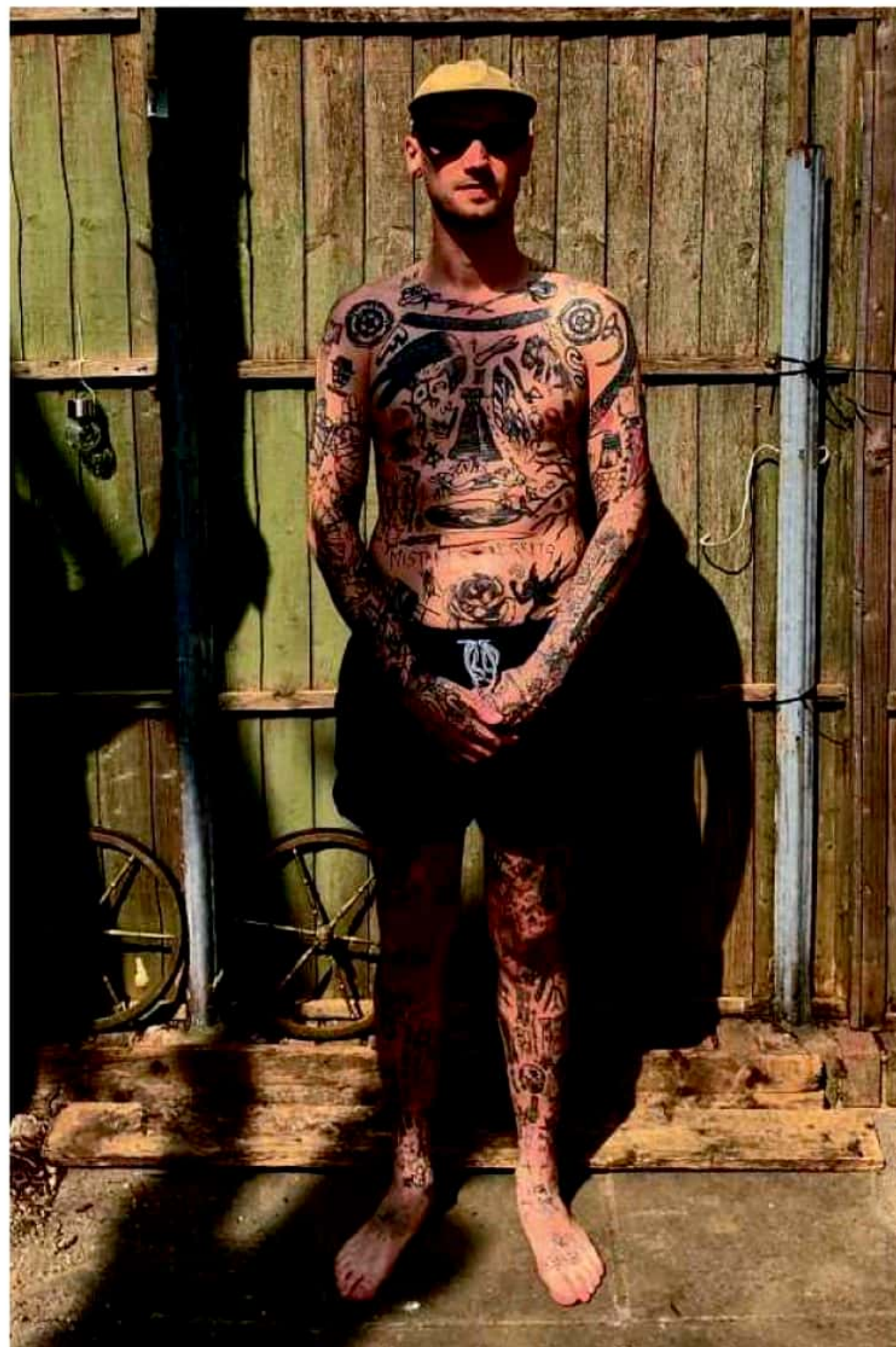
"The idea of tattooing myself every day through the isolation came about in a way quite naturally," he said. "I thought it would be a good way of implementing some structure into my day, now that I can't tattoo from the studio."

Mr Woodhead learned his craft by giving himself

100 tattoos before he ever tattooed another person. Before lockdown, his body was already covered in nearly 1,000 tattoos, so he thought an additional 100 or so wouldn't make much difference. He planned to keep going until he is able to return to his studio.

So far, he has tattooed himself by contorting his body, without the use of a mirror. He said the back of his legs and elbows were the most difficult areas. Ideas for new designs have come easily; his isolation tattoos included a virus, a butterfly, a tiger, a clown and a mermaid.

Mr Woodhead said his lockdown strategy has "definitely helped me get through the endless day-to-day. It's really boring being stuck at home, and without that creative process I would be pretty lost." However, he does not encourage anyone who is not a professional tattoo artist to try this at home. edition.cnn.com, 4 May 2020.



ABOVE: London tattooist Chris Woodhead has spent lockdown inking his own body.

## SIDELINES...

### LONESOME TOWN

Antonella Argenti, the mayor of small Italian town Villa del Conte, has appointed a 'loneliness tsar' after being inundated with citizens' complaints of isolation and lack of a support network. "We are all becoming living robots," she said. Town hall staff will now offer help and a sympathetic ear. Unfortunately, their office is only open Tuesdays and Saturdays. Guardian, 15 Feb 2020.

### PUMP & CIRCUMSTANCE

Chicago airport security staff discovered a grenade-like object in Madin Azad Amin's luggage. The 29-year-old was flying to Turkey with his mother and was too embarrassed to explain it was actually a penis enlargement pump, so he told them it was a bomb. He is now facing up to three years' imprisonment. Scotsman, 24 Aug; Canberra Times, Sydney D.Telegraph, 25 Aug 2006.

### FLAPJACK ATTACK

A policeman was assaulted with a flapjack and a cup of water after prisoner Jason Higgins became angry at being refused hot drinks in his cell. Higgins, 49, is a repeat offender with 169 convictions. Sun, 1 Jun 2020.

### ROBOT WIFE

Lack of success at finding a partner caused an Australian man to purchase and then fall in love with a female robot. The \$6,000 (£4,600) automaton can talk, smile and move its head, and its skin warms up. The man takes her with him to social events and has placed an engagement ring on her finger, hoping to be the first Australian to marry a robot. 7news.com.au, 4 Feb 2020.

### PLASTERED PASTOR

A Detroit woman is suing a North Carolina pastor and his church for over \$2 million after he allegedly urinated on her during a flight from Las Vegas to Detroit. Her lawyer says the Raleigh minister had a blood alcohol content over twice the legal driving limit. She had fallen asleep shortly after take-off, but woke up after feeling something warm touching her. Her screams attracted the attention of an off-duty officer who restrained the pastor. detroitnews.com, 29 Oct 2020.





## SIDELINES...

### FLAMING ROMANCE

A Sheffield man planning to propose to his girlfriend ended up setting his house on fire after lighting hundreds of tealight candles. The blaze started after the man had gone to pick up his girlfriend for the big moment. When the couple returned they found the flat engulfed in flames. A spokesperson said that fortunately no one had been injured and the girlfriend "still said yes". *BBC News*, 4 Aug 2020.

### OH DEER

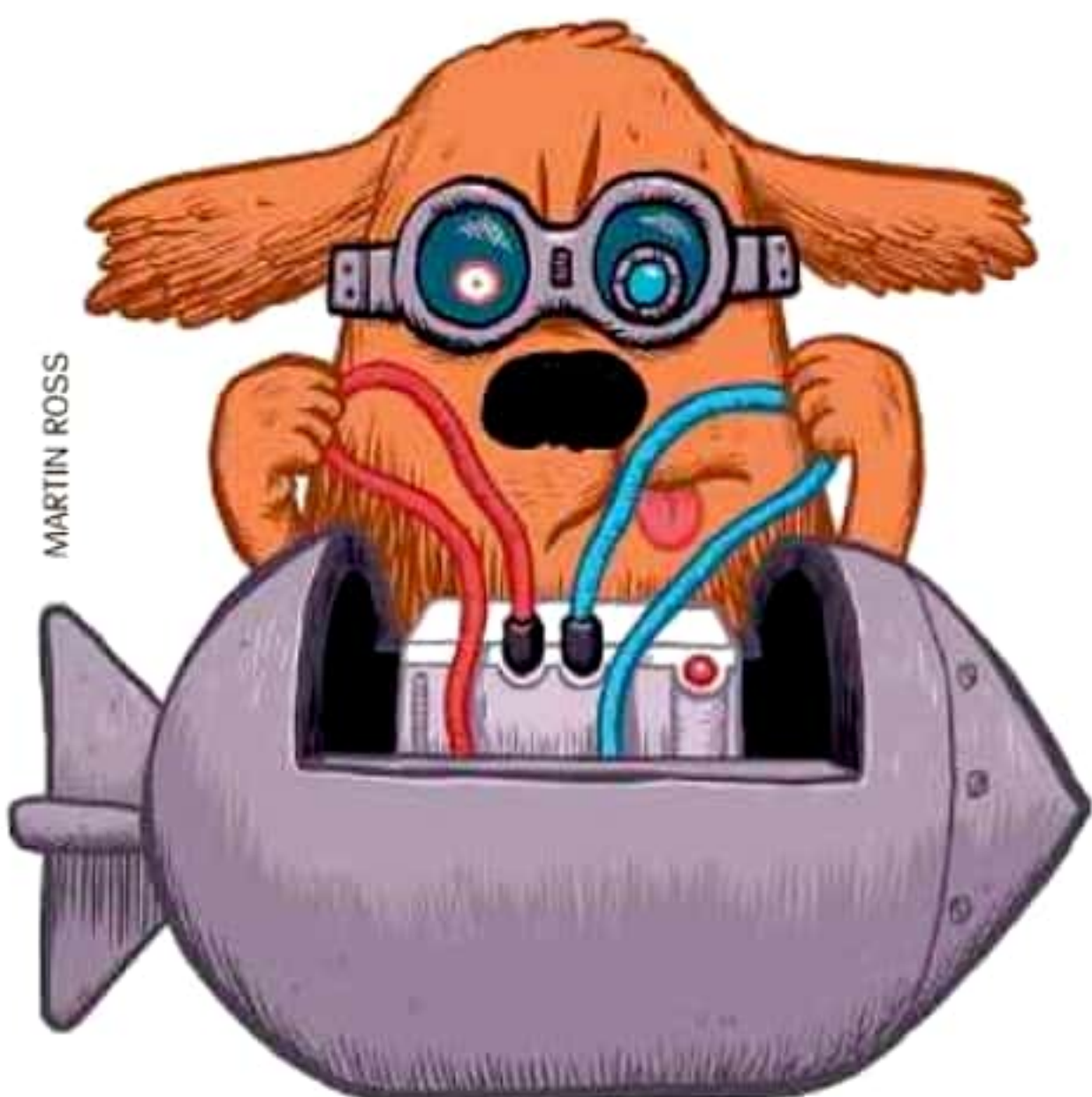
A hunter in the Czech Republic was attacked by a deer that ripped his sleeve and caught his rifle on its antlers as it fled into the woods. Another hunter reported seeing a deer with a rifle dangling from its antlers more than half a mile (0.8km) away from the incident. *[UPI]* 25 Nov 2020.

### CARROTS FOR ART'S SAKE

The mystery of why 32 tons (29,000kg) of carrots were found dumped on a London street was solved when Rafael Perez Evans, an art student at Goldsmiths College, explained that the exhibit was an art installation intended to raise awareness of food waste. *upi.com*, 30 Sep 2020.

### ROBODOGS

US researchers have developed augmented reality goggles to be worn by military dogs that would allow handlers to give commands remotely. The military often uses dogs to search for explosive devices and hazardous materials and to assist in rescue work. Working dogs need handlers to give them commands, typically using hand signals or laser pointers, but being at the dog's side to do so clearly places the handlers at some risk, and the use of laser light may reveal their position to the enemy. *[UPI]* 6 Oct 2020.



## FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Xmas stowaways, plus sonic attack update



CINDY ORD / GETTY IMAGES



RAVENSBEARD WILDLIFE CENTER

ABOVE LEFT: The Rockefeller Christmas tree is hoisted into place. ABOVE RIGHT: Rocky the owl. BELOW: Xmas koala surprise.

### UNEXPECTED FINDS IN CHRISTMAS TREES [FT389:10]

Each year in New York City, the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree is erected at Rockefeller Plaza. This year's tree was found to harbour an unexpected stowaway – a very small owl. The tree was cut down in November at Oneonta, New York State, and the owl – later determined to be a Saw-whet owl – discovered while the tree was being transported to Manhattan. The Saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) is one the smallest species of owl in North America, typically 17-22cm (6.7-8.7in) tall with a 42-56.3cm (16.5-22.2in) wingspan.

The owl, dubbed 'Rockefeller' or 'Rocky', is now recovering at the Ravensbeard Wildlife Center in Saugerties, New York, which reported: "So far so good. His eyes are bright and he seems relatively in good condition with all he's been through". When he's ready to fly again, Rocky will be released in Ravensbeard's grounds, with its acres of trees in which to make a new home. Saw-whet owls are migratory, making them quite capable of adapting to new places. *edition.cnn.com*, 19 Nov 2020.



MCCORMICK FAMILY / FACEBOOK





● A South Australian family found a new ornament on their Christmas tree when they came home: a wild and somewhat confused juvenile koala. The McCormicks, of Coromandel Valley, Adelaide, arrived back around 6pm on 2 December and suspected something unusual when their dog made straight for the Christmas tree and began sniffing around. “Mum thought that was a bit weird,” said Taylah McCormick, 16. “There were baubles all over the floor... [we] looked up and there was a koala in the tree. It was pretty tangled up in the lights. It was a fake tree and very old but she still tried eating the leaves off it... I saw her munch down on some but she stopped when she realised it was plastic.”

Taylah’s mother Amanda McCormick said she was in shock. “I thought ‘Is this a joke?’ I thought one of my kids may have put like a soft toy in there, but no, it was a live one,” she said. “We’ve had them in our trees before but not inside on our Christmas tree... It must have crawled in when the doors were open, it would have been in our house for at least three hours”.

The family called Adelaide and Hills Koala Rescue, but co-founder Dee Hearne-Hellon admitted that, at first, they didn’t believe the call was genuine. “The call went through to our 24-hour hotlines and of course the operator at first thought it was a prank call,” she explained. The rescue team quickly arrived to disentangle the koala, which Taylah had dubbed Daphne, from the tree and its decorations. Hearne-Hellon said Daphne was a juvenile female around three or four years old and in good health, and said the koala had probably wandered into the home because it liked the look of the tree: “They are curious, and they are in the suburbs, and if they see something that they want to have a look at they’ll just drop in and have a look.”

Daphne was released into a tree in a nearby bushy area, and the McCormicks said they will be looking out for her from now on. “It was a very memorable experience,” Amanda McCormick said. “After a bad year, it was nice to have that.” *Guardian*, 3 Dec 2020.

## HAVANA SONIC ATTACK [FT359:22, 360:14, 363:4, 370:26-27, 382:10-11]

The first official explanation for the mysterious illness that afflicted US and Canadian diplomats stationed in Cuba and China has been proposed in a report commissioned by the US State Department (‘An Assessment of Illness in US Government Employees and their Families at Overseas Embassies’: [www.nap.edu/catalog/25889](http://www.nap.edu/catalog/25889)).

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report suggests that the debilitating symptoms experienced by US and Canadian embassy staff, ranging from nosebleeds, nausea, dizziness, blurred vision, headaches, hearing loss and speech problems, were likely to have been caused by directed radio frequency energy.

Various explanations had previously been suggested, including exposure to neurotoxins and noisy crickets. The mating call of a particular species, the Indies short-tailed cricket (*Anurogryllus celerinictus*) was said to resemble the sounds reported by some embassy staff, who testified to having heard a high-pitched chirping. Others reported hearing a grinding noise or experiencing a ringing in their ears. Mass psychogenic illness had also been posited as a cause, but while the report conceded that psychological and social factors may have played a part in the so-called ‘Havana syndrome’, these would not account for “the acute initial, sudden-onset, distinctive, and unusual symptoms” and signs. “After considering the information available to it and a set of possible mechanisms,” the report concluded, “the committee felt that many of the distinctive and acute signs, symptoms, and observations reported by state department employees are consistent with the effects of directed, pulsed RF (radio frequency) energy.”

The report’s researchers did not identify the source of this pulsed energy, nor did they suggest a perpetrator, but noted that Western and Soviet studies going back decades offered “circumstantial support for this possible mechanism”. The illnesses suffered by a number

of embassy staff in Cuba in 2016 led to the US State Department’s expulsion of two Cuban diplomats from Washington in 2017. The then president Donald Trump remarked: “It’s a very unusual attack, as you know. But I do believe Cuba is responsible.” Cuban authorities vehemently denied any involvement: “Cuba has never, nor would it ever, allow that the Cuban territory be used for any action against accredited diplomatic agents or their families, without exception.”

In August 2017, US officials included Russia among a list of countries having an adversarial relationship with the USA who might be involved, Russia being one of few countries to have used microwave technology before. One (unproven) theory was that certain rogue Cuban intelligence officials had collaborated with Russia, unhappy at a recent thawing of relations between Cuba and the USA under the Obama administration and seeking a reversal of such détente under Trump.

But, while the report has seemingly eliminated the Indies short-tailed cricket and mass psychogenic illness as causative agents, it still remains a mystery as to whether the pulsed microwave energy was produced and directed deliberately, and, if so, who was responsible. The report committee was left with a number of concerns, not least that “the mere consideration of such a scenario raises grave concerns about a world with disinhibited malevolent actors and new tools for causing harm to others, as if the US government does not have its hands full already with naturally occurring threats”. The committee recommended more research be conducted, concerned that new cases among US staff working overseas might occur in the future.

Mark Lenzi, a US diplomat who fell ill while working in Guangzhou, welcomed the report. “My government looked the other way when they knew I and my family were injured,” he told the *New York Times*. “This report is just the beginning, and when the American people know the full extent of this administration’s cover-up of the radiofrequency attacks in China in particular they will be outraged.” *Guardian* *D.Telegraph*, *wfsb.com*, 6 Dec 2020.

## SIDELINES...

### DODGY GEYSER

A Yellowstone National Park ranger caught a group of people at Shoshone Geyser Basin sitting in a hot spring with cooking pots and two whole chickens inside a burlap sack. Travelling off boardwalks or designated trails in hydrothermal areas is prohibited in Yellowstone, as hot springs have injured or killed several people. The ringleader appeared in Mammoth Hot Springs court, where he pleaded guilty on 10 September. He was fined \$600 and banned from Yellowstone for two years. *eastidahonews.com*, 30 Oct 2020.

### INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

A Washington State couple were reunited with their black and white cat, Panda, after he had hitched a 2,500 mile (4,000km) ride. Christina and Josh Clevenger searched their local neighbourhood without success. They subsequently learned that Panda had turned up at a Home Depot store in Kenai, Alaska. He had apparently hitched a ride in a mail truck bound for a Washington transit centre where he had wandered into a shipping container, trapped for around 10 days until arriving in Alaska. *[UPI]* 6 Nov 2020.

### ISOLATED VILLAGE

For 18 months, the village of Aberhosan, Powys, lost its Internet connection at exactly 7am every morning. The mystery was solved when engineers discovered an old television set owned by an unnamed villager would, when switched on, emit a signal that interfered with the entire village’s broadband. The embarrassed owner of the TV has promised not to use it again. *BBC News*, 22 Sept 2020.

### SEASONAL NAME

Ms Tilly Christmas and Mr Kieran White, both 20, have become Mr and Mrs White-Christmas after tying the knot in November at a pre-lockdown wedding. The childhood sweethearts, who met at school aged 12, were married at the Roman Baths in Bath. Mrs White-Christmas said: “I wanted to keep the name going. It just so happens the man I am marrying has the perfect surname to go with it.” *BBC News*, 5 Nov 2020.





## SIDELINES...

### PARROT ALARM

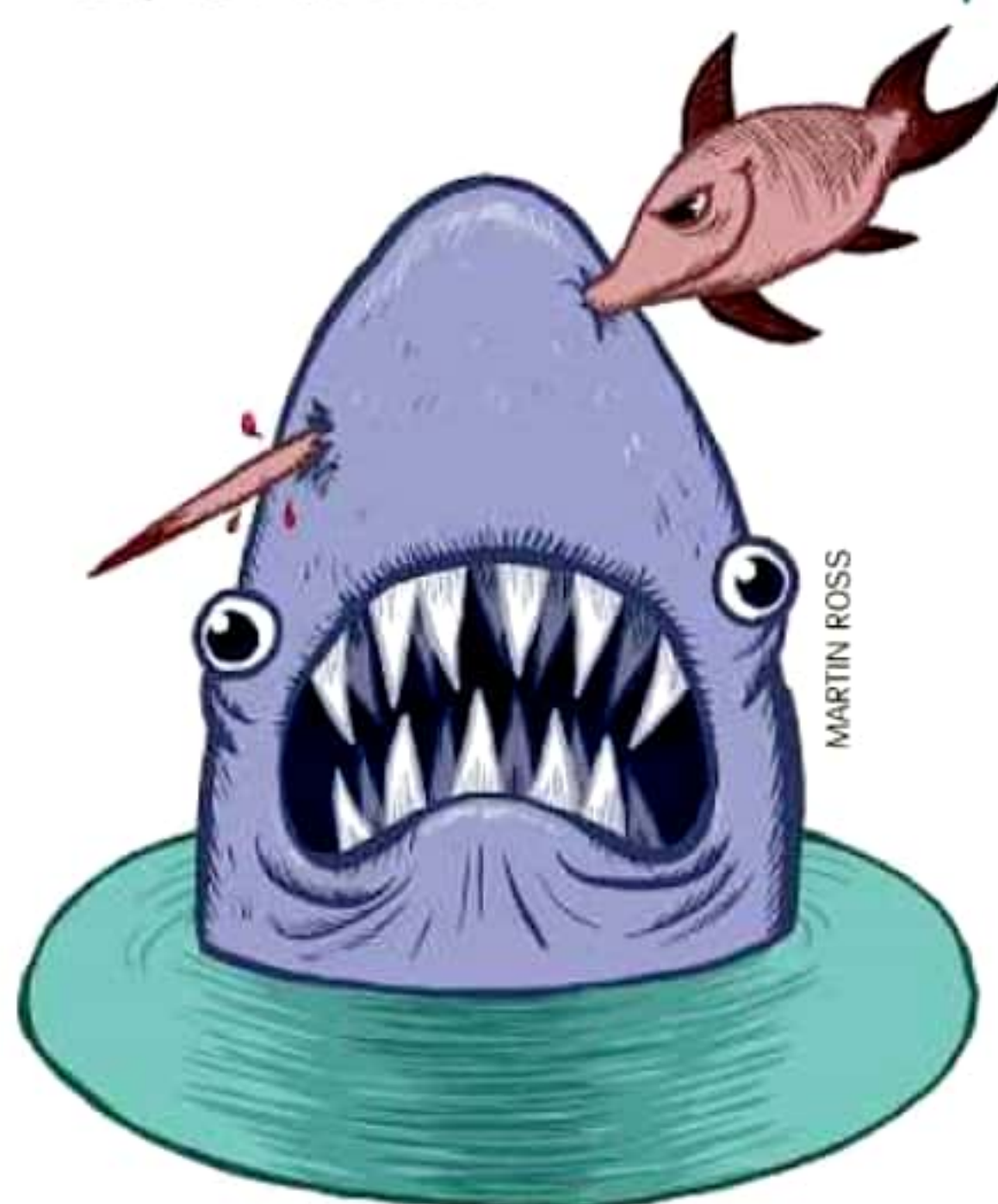
An Australian man survived a late-night house fire thanks to Eric, his pet parrot. Anton Nguyen was fast asleep when his two-storey house in Brisbane, Queensland, caught fire. "I heard a bang and Eric started to yell so I woke up and I smelled a bit of smoke," he said. "I grabbed Eric, took off and bolted downstairs." It took four crews over an hour to contain the blaze in the suburb of Kangaroo Point. Mr Nguyen escaped with the bird and a bag, and suffered no injuries. *BBC News, 4 Nov 2020.*

### CATHEDRAL MAGNIFICAT

Southwark Cathedral held a special memorial service for a stray cat who had made the cathedral her home for the past 12 years. Doorkins Magnificat passed away on 30 September and in an unusual move, the Dean of Southwark Cathedral, Andrew Dunn, hosted a live-streamed service of thanksgiving. "She was enormously popular and had a massive Twitter following," he said. *edition.cnn.com, 29 Oct 2020.*

### UNDERWATER FIGHT CLUB

The bodies of least six sharks found on Mediterranean shores had swordfish swords stabbed through their bodies – usually in the head. The latest example was the corpse of an adult 15ft (4.5 metre) thresher shark washed up on the Libyan coast. Inside it was a foot (30cm) of swordfish sword that had broken off near its heart. These cases may represent preliminary scientific evidence of high-stakes shark vs swordfish duels, stories of which abound in sailor lore but which have hitherto not been validated. *boingboing.net, 30 Oct 2020.*



## CRIMINAL CRITTERS | A goggle-pilfering moggy and some potty-mouthed parrots



ABOVE: Avery the cat with a selection of the stolen swimming goggles she has brought home.

### GOGGLE-THIEF CAT

Sally Bell's cat Avery has always brought small animals back to her Bristol home as trophies, but last summer, the four-year-old feline changed his behaviour and began bringing back swimming goggles as gifts for Mrs Bell, his tally so far being eight pairs.

Despite having checked with all her neighbours, Mrs Bell said she had no idea where the goggles came from. "He's always been a hunter, bringing home mice and frogs and things like that," she said, but one day in June he presented her with a pair of goggles. "It was just one pair and I live in a close and there are quite a lot of families with children so I didn't think anything of it." But three days later, Avery produced another two pairs. "That's when it became really strange. For a few days it was a pair every day. I went round all my neighbours who've got children," said a puzzled Mrs Bell. "One of the houses has a swimming pool so I thought it was bound to be them." But nobody in her part of Longwell Green in east Bristol has reported any missing goggles. "He doesn't play with the goggles, he just leaves them for me. In fact, the pair he brought home the other day had a dead mouse with them – two

presents at once."

Mrs Bell feels bad in case the goggles belong to children who are getting into trouble because they keep losing them. She has appealed for information on social media and hopes to reunite the owners with their eyewear, but there have been no leads. "All people do is laugh. I've had no takers, but Avery has become quite a celebrity." *BBC News, 14 July, 2020.*

### SWEARY PARROTS

Five naughty parrots were temporarily removed from Lincolnshire Wildlife Park after they began swearing at customers. The newly acquired African Greys had been in quarantine together in the same room. To alleviate their boredom, it appears they entertained themselves by sharing their knowledge of swear words. "Every now and then you'll get one that swears and it's always funny," said Steve Nichols, the park's chief executive officer. "But, just by coincidence, we took in five in the same week and because they were all quarantined together it meant that one room was just full of swearing birds. The more they swear the more you laugh, which then triggers them to swear

again." Mr Nichols explained how the potty-mouthed parrots also learned to mimic laughter, "so when one swears, one laughs and before you know it just got to be like an old working men's club scenario where they are all just swearing and laughing."

As soon as their quarantine had ended, the birds were put out on display, but within 20 minutes they had sworn at a customer "and for the next group of people, all sorts of obscenities came out." Mr Nichols said his staff had been amused by the parrots' language and had received no customer complaints, but because the weekend was approaching with children coming to visit, a decision was made to put the birds in an enclosure away from paying customers, in the hope that they would start learning other parrots' calls instead of one another's bad language.

"They are African grey parrots and they are very, very good at learning vocalisations from all sorts of noises," Mr Nichols explained. "What we will do now is release them, but in separate areas, so at least if they do swear it is not as bad as three or four of them all blasting it out at once." *lincolnshirelive.co.uk; grimsbytelegraph.co.uk, 28 Sept 2020.*





## MEET THE FUGGINGERS

An Austrian village is to change its name after its signposts were repeatedly ridiculed on social media. The villagers of Fucking, known as Fuckingers, have agreed their hamlet of 100 people will be renamed Fugging from 1 January 2021. Fucking is situated 350 kilometres (215 miles) east of Vienna, and was first officially inhabited from around 1070; local lore suggests a sixth century Bavarian nobleman called Focko founded the settlement. Just across the border in Bavaria is another village called Petting. See **FT87:17, 188:09**. [AFP], 26 Nov 2020. PHOTO: Manfred Fesl/APA/AFP via Getty Images.



PAUL SIEVEKING digs up ancient seeds, early Amazon crops and glass grave goods from Denmark



ABOVE: Examples of the beautifully decorated glassware found at the Himlingøje burial site in Denmark.  
BELOW: Date palms in Gaza. Dates have been successfully grown from 2,000-year-old seeds found in the region.

## GORGEOUS GLASS

The Himlingøje burial site in Denmark lies beside the lower reaches of the river Tryggevælde Å on the Stevns peninsula. It was used for burials over several generations in the second and third century AD. Men and women of high birth were buried there, with an abundance of fine grave goods, such as these glass vessels made in the Roman provinces. Some were so well preserved that finders used them as flower vases without realising that they were from antiquity. *en.natmus.dk (Copenhagen), 25 Sept 2020.*

## EARLY AMAZON CROPS

Far from being a pristine wilderness, some regions of the Amazon have been profoundly altered by humans dating back 10 millennia. During this period, crops were being cultivated in a remote location in what is now northern Bolivia. Evidence shows that crops were domesticated at four important locations around the world: China saw the cultivation of rice, while in the Middle East it was grains, in Central America and Mexico it was maize, while potatoes and quinoa emerged in the Andes. Now the Llanos de Moxos region of southwestern Amazonia should be seen as a fifth key region.

The area is a savannah but is dotted with raised areas of land covered with trees. The area floods for part of the year but these “forest islands” remain above the waters. Some 4,700 of these small mounds were gradually developed by humans dropping their rubbish. Dr Umberto Lombardo from the University of Berne, Switzerland, who led the research, said: “Of course, rubbish is very rich in nutrients, and as these areas grow

they rise above the level of the flood during the rainy season, so they become good places to settle with fertile soil, so people come back to the same places all the time.” Some 30 of these islands were examined for evidence of crop planting, revealing fragments of silica called phytoliths, tiny pieces of glass that form inside the cells of plants. The shape of these vary, depending on which plants they come from. The researchers were able to identify evidence of manioc (cassava, yuca) grown 10,350 years ago, squash 10,250 years ago, and maize more recently – just 6,850 years ago.

The people who lived at this time probably also survived on sweet potato and peanuts, as well as fish and large herbivores. They may have brought their plants with them. “It confirms again that domestication begins at the start of the Holocene period, when we have this climate change that we see as we exit from the Ice Age,” said Dr Lombardo. “We entered this warm period, when all over the world at the same time, people start cultivating.” *BBC News, 8 April 2020.*

## DATES DORMANT FOR MILLENNIA

Dates have been successfully grown from 2,000-year-old seeds recovered from various sites in the Levant. To grow the plants, ethnobotanist Sarah Sallon and colleagues sorted through hundreds of seeds. Some were excavated from Masada, others from caves around the Dead Sea used for storage and living quarters. The researchers soaked 34 seeds in warm water and liquid fertiliser before planting them in sterile potting soil. Six sprouted into seedlings that would eventually become date palms.

The successful seeds were all several centimetres long, 30 per cent larger than modern date seeds. To verify that they were ancient – and not more recent specimens deposited, for example, by burrowing animals – the team carbon-dated seed shell fragments clinging to the roots after the seeds had successfully sprouted. The seeds were between 2,200 and 1,800 years old. Initial genetic analysis of the plants grown from the ancient seeds suggests farmers in the region were growing dates that mixed traits from around the ancient world. The result, according to classical writers like Galen, Strabo, and Herodotus, was a large, sweet, shelf-stable fruit, a prized treat throughout the Roman world. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Judean date farming declined; by the time of the Crusades, the area’s date plantations were no more.

The new plants could be the beginning of a revival – if not of the ancient dates then at least of their best features. The plan is to pollinate the female plants, hopefully allowing them to bear fruit with traits that could be used to improve modern varieties, increasing their sweetness, size and resistance to modern pests. The plants could also provide a window into how date plants manage to protect and preserve their DNA over the course of many centuries. Although an older grass seed was successfully germinated after millennia frozen in Siberian permafrost, these dates are some of the oldest plants ever successfully germinated. Sallon says the unusual conditions around the Dead Sea probably helped. “Low altitude, heat, dry conditions – all of those could affect the longevity of the embryo,” she says. The seeds’ unusual size could have played a role, too. The more genetic material there is, the more it is likely to remain whole, according to Robin Allaby, a geneticist at the University of Warwick. “But it’s still extraordinary. It beggars belief that you would have entire chromosomes intact.” *sciencemag.org, 5 Feb 2020.*







# CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

## 254: ASP-ERGER'S SYNDROME

OCTAVIUS:

If they had swallowed poison, 'twould appear

By external swelling...

DOLABELLA:

Here, on her breast,

There is a vent of blood and something blown:

The like is on her arm.

FIRST GUARD:

This is an aspic's trail: and these fig-leaves

Have slime upon them...

(Shakespeare, *Antony & Cleopatra* V. ii. 343-52)

At frequent intervals, newspapers carry the latest claim by Professor X or Herpetologist Y that Cleopatra did not die by snakebite, sempiternally headlined as a sensational new discovery. Nonsense. The manner of Cleopatra's death was immediately debated and disputed by contemporary Greek and Roman writers and their successors.

As Plutarch (*Life of Antony*, ch86 para2), echoed a century later by Dio Cassius (*Roman History*, bk51 ch14 para1), put it: "Nobody really knows how she died."

We can scotch one snake. Some claim self-venomed suicide is tricky, perhaps impossible. Tricky, yes; impossible, no. Various websites detail the coroner's report on Texas teenager Grant Thompson who contrived multiple bites from a cobra.

50+ years ago – Ye Gods! – I debated with John Gwyn Griffiths (*Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 47, 1961, 113-8; 50, 1964, 181-2) over whether Cleopatra used one snake or two. Looks like academic pedantry, actually necessitated by discrepant sources.

At that time, I plumped for a single serpent, with greater confidence than I now feel. Her two slave girls, Iras and Charmion, died along with Cleopatra, supposedly also bitten. However, herpetologists say it is almost impossible for an asp (= Egyptian cobra) to deliver more than a single dose of venom, also that death from such is lingeringly agonising, alternatively that a bite is not reliably fatal – either way, not the ideal way for a hasty – as Plutarch insists – suicide. Cleopatra should have known this, since she had regularly tested snakebite speed on prisoners. And, her slave girls might simply have poisoned themselves.

No snake was found – a locked-room mystery. In the Taylor-Burton film, one is



faintly glimpsed slithering away. After Cleopatra's death, a eunuch (says Plutarch) suicided by snakebite, the Greek word being a simple plural – snakes, not asp.

Earliest source is Strabo (*Geography*, bk17 ch10), possibly in Alexandria at the time. He adduces two versions, asp-bite or self-administered toxic ointment, adding the possibility of murder.

Contemporary Roman poets Virgil, Horace, and Propertius all posit two snakes. Propertius had seen the picture of her suicide carried in Octavian's triumphal procession, although Plutarch says it depicted only one. Pairs of snakes appear in other Virgilian episodes, this number possibly a stock descriptive one. One historian, Velleius Paterculus (bk2 ch87), has a single snake, as does poet Martial (bk4 no59). A later one, Florus (bk2 ch21) has two.

Often overlooked is Galen's treatise on snakebite remedies (annotated text/translation by Robert Adam Leigh online). After remarking he'd often seen executions by snakebite at Alexandria, regarded as "the most humane", he later asserts that Cleopatra bit her own arm and applied poison.

Plutarch and Dio Cassius are the most detailed. Both adduce the account of Cleopatra's personal physician, Olympus. Had this survived, we might not have needed these modern debates. Yet, his memoir clearly offered no conclusive evidence – why not?

Dio mentions a theory that she used a poisoned kirby grip – very James Bond. Possibly conditioned by the outbreak in his

time of mysterious serial killings by same; cf. **FT129:51**, comparing these to ones adduced by Fort (*Books*, pp884-91) – my magazine debut!

Strangely undiscussed is Plutarch's claim that reptile or reptiles were brought to Cleopatra by a vendor inside a basket hidden by large figs. Who was this fellow? Why did he so opportunely call? Summoned by Cleopatra, or one of the slave-girls? Why needed, since she had her own in-palace supply? Was he a regular? Or sped there by Uber chariot? How big a basket was needed to conceal a six-foot cobra? Perhaps a prototype of Mrs Thatcher's famously capacious handbag... Possibly relevant that, just as snakes comported a sexual connotation, so 'Figs' was Roman slang for hæmorrhoids.

Was she bumped off by Octavian? Something anciently hinted at, modernly frequently revived – forget Shakespeare (a two-snake man) here. It was not done at Rome to execute a woman, and no kudos from trailing her behind a triumphal chariot. What could/would he have done with her? Lethally suspicious (he quickly liquidated her son Cæsarion), he might well have feared she could cause more trouble, being very popular with Egyptians, not least because she was the only Ptolemy to bother to learn their language. From Octavian's point of view, better dead than wed. From hers, had she inveigled him into her boudoir, after Cæsar and Antony that would have been a remarkable hat-trick of top notches on her bed-post.

This scenario, however, involves ignoring Suetonius and Dio, both of whom say Octavian rushed in the local snakebite experts known as Psylli, trained to identify the culprit reptile and apply appropriate antidote. They failed – so much for this Ministry of Psylli Walks...

Can't do better here than quote the doyen of historians, Sir Ronald Syme (*The Roman Revolution*, 1939, p299): "The bite of the asp served in double measure the convenience of a Roman politician."

Since this is *FT*, I must end with AJ Bethell's unpublished (1921, copies in the Bodleian and British Library) *From Cleopatra to Christ*, in which he 'proves' that Cleopatra survived, left Alexandria, and metamorphosed into the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ – perfect pendant to Baignent/Leigh/Lincoln *The Holy Blood & the Holy Grail* (1982), not to mention Dan Brown...





# Finding the mystery monolith

DAVID HAMBLING says that new geolocation tools may prove useful to fortune investigations

When a helicopter survey of wild bighorn sheep stumbled on a mysterious metal monolith in Utah, a photograph of the find quickly went viral (see p4). The Utah Department of Public Safety kept the location secret, not because they were hiding alien technology, but because they feared an influx of curious visitors badly prepared for the hostile landscape. This would inevitably lead to a spike in calls for rescue and perhaps injury or death.

However, the precise spot was revealed on the Internet almost immediately. Was this an insider leak from Utah's own Agent Mulder, a hint from the mysterious monolith-builders themselves, or the result of psychic remote viewing? In fact, the monolith was found using old-fashioned methods, but linked to ultra-modern data sources. It shows how crowd-sourced 'geolocation' is increasingly able to pinpoint anything, anywhere from just one photo, with what looks like miraculous skill.

Sometimes analysts do not even need to look at the picture. Almost all modern smartphones automatically record the GPS co-ordinates every time they take a photo, and store the information with the image's so-called EXIF data. Unless the geotagging data is deliberately removed or faked, finding the location is a matter of looking at the EXIF.

Most of the time though, Internet picture sleuths look for clues in the image. Obviously, it helps to have the general locale. If the picture from Madrid has a church in the background, then the search becomes one of looking through a database of Madrid church images and finding one of the right conformation seen from the right angle.

Any text in the background of an image may locate it exactly. Not just street names, but shop names and even logos can be as unique as fingerprints. Zooming and enhancing to pick up a telephone number from a shop sign can yield a street address in seconds.

Next comes the technique of identifying landmarks. Local knowledge is best, but smart technology is increasingly helpful. Apps like Google Lens, which uses trained AI to identify common objects, can pick up features like graffiti tags, which may be enough to locate a specific building anywhere in the world.

Photographs without signage or landmarks often show a road and adjacent buildings. Analysts will turn this into an overhead map view. Sunlight and shadows



can indicate orientation and which way is North. All they need to do then is scans map looking for a road layout that corresponds to their diagram. This sounds laborious, and it is, but crowdsourcing can help: a number of searchers can break up the territory into sections and each painstakingly go through one square.

A similar approach can work without roads. Open-source investigation team Bellingcat set out to confirm the location of pictures of a crashed fighter jet in India. They did it, with a lot of trial and error, by looking for a pair of boulders and a line of trees in the picture on Google Earth in the right general area. This type of effort is becoming easier with AI software like PlaNet, another Google project, which by 2016 had digested 90 million landscape images. In 2016, PlaNet could beat a panel of 'well-travelled humans' at identifying locations, and it has probably improved considerably since then.

The Utah monolith was a tough challenge: no roads or buildings, and officials only revealed that it was in 'Red Rock country' and found by biologists on a helicopter survey. Even guessing the spot was likely in the biologists' beat of Bears Ears National Monument only narrowed it down to 300 square miles.

The Internet's geolocating community took up the challenge. A user who we shall call Bear\_Lover (real version is rude) examined the rock type, colour and shape in the photograph, and the texture of the canyon floor. It was red and white

LEFT: The mysterious Utah monolith.

sandstone, without the black streaks seen on higher cliffs in Utah, with an erosion pattern indicating it was high up in a watershed with little running water.

Bear\_Lover deduced the site was a southeast facing canyon of rounded red and white rocks; they also noted the larger cliff in the background, and there must be a flat landing spot suitable for a helicopter nearby.

Bear\_Lover found the flight track of the survey helicopter, which took off from Monticello and headed north before dropping below radar observation. Then it was just a matter of scanning online images of the area. It took them 30 minutes of searching to find the right general location, and then another 15 minutes to find the exact spot.

"Yes, I'm a freak," admitted Bear\_Lover.

This location allowed other information to be brought in. Many commentators had assumed the monolith was put up recently, perhaps just a few days before, maybe as part of a publicity campaign for a movie or videogame. But an examination of the shadows in historic Google Earth images showed it had been in place since at least 2016. Nouska du Saar, a Dutch journalist and open-source intelligence expert, trawled commercial satellite imagery to pin down its appearance to between 7 July and 21 October 2016.

Like all of Sherlock Holmes's amazing deductions, such feats look simple when all the steps are explained. But geolocation is a powerful technique for solving photographic mysteries. Currently it is mainly used by groups like Bellingcat to establish whether photographs support claims of massacres or other crimes, or whether they are really from another time and place entirely.

As the monolith case shows, the same techniques are likely to become important for fortune. Whether it's a matter of pinning down the location of a Bigfoot sighting, or verifying whether anonymous UFO footage really was taken last week in California and not 10 years ago in China. Everyone now has a camera phone, and events are increasingly likely to yield pictures. The patient scrutiny of the Internet's hive mind can reveal all kinds of valuable information.

Though the question of who placed that monolith remains unanswered...





# MILLION DOLLAR METEORITE

Did an Indonesian coffin maker really get rich from a crashing space rock?



ABOVE LEFT: Mr Hutagalung with the meteorite that crashed through the roof of his house. ABOVE RIGHT: One expert has described it as "an extraterrestrial mudball".

Last August, Josua Hutagalung, a coffin maker who lives in a village in Sumatra, Indonesia, heard a loud crash in his house. Upon investigation, he discovered that a heavy object had crashed through his roof at such high velocity that it had gone right through the metal roofing and buried itself 15cm (6in) deep into the soil floor of his home. Mr Hutagalung dug out a small boulder weighing about 2kg (4.4lb), which was still warm. "That's when I thought that the object I was lifting was a meteorite," he told reporters. "It was impossible for someone to throw a rock that big on to the roof of the house."

The news of his find quickly spread around the world after Mr Hutagalung posted photos of it on Facebook. The story became headline news around the world, with claims that the meteorite was worth £1.35m, making the villager an overnight millionaire. It was also suggested that Mr Hutagalung had been short-changed by selling his rock cut-price to unscrupulous US buyers. However, it turned out that the meteorite is not worth

millions, and no one had been ripped off.

Meteorites that have journeyed through space, crash-landing by chance on our planet, which is younger than they are, are typically over four billion years old and thus tend to exert a certain fascination. Meteorite collectors were keen to buy it, but due to international flight restrictions caused by Covid-19 they were unable to journey to Sumatra and see the ancient rock for themselves. Potential buyers in the US contacted fellow meteorite enthusiast Jared Collins, an American living in Indonesia, to ask for his assistance. He travelled to Sumatra, met Mr Hutagalung, and inspected the boulder to authenticate it.

"It's incredibly exciting to have the opportunity to hold something that is a genuine, physical remnant from the very early stages of the creation of our Solar System," the American told the BBC. "I immediately noticed its distinctive jet black interior and a thin light brown, pock-marked exterior, which was created when it was travelling

through the atmosphere. It also had a very unique smell which is hard to explain in words."

The US buyer agreed a price, and the meteorite was sold, with Mr Collins acting as intermediary, but all parties stress that the undisclosed amount was fair and that no one was cheated. The amount was nowhere near the fabulous sums quoted in the headlines.

Apart from Mr Hutagalung's rock, other, smaller pieces had been found nearby on Sumatra. Experts suggest it would originally have been one metre (39in) across upon entering the Earth's atmosphere, but broke up on entry, so that only a few small pieces would have made it to the ground. Some of these fragments were also sold; two appeared on eBay with asking prices of \$285 for 0.3g (0.01oz) and \$29,120 for 33.68g (1.2oz). That equates to about \$860 per gram, so given that Mr Hutagalung's find weighed 2kg (4.4lb), it seemed – on paper – that his was worth around \$1.8m.

Not so. "When I read that figure, I had to laugh," said Laurence Garvie, a research

professor at the School of Earth and Space Exploration at Arizona State University and an international authority in the field. "I've seen this story so many times before," he adds. "Someone finds a meteorite and they look on eBay and think it's worth millions because they see small fragments sold for a large amount." But, Prof Garvie explained, because of people's fascination with these ancient rocks from deep space, they are prepared to pay "a few hundred or thousand dollars for a small piece. But no one would pay millions for a larger boulder." In fact, the price usually decreases as the size of the rock increases.

So if the market value of a meteorite is near-impossible to determine, then how much was Mr Hutagalung's rock actually worth? Prof Garvie points out that since it's about 70 to 80 per cent clay, it is, essentially, "an extraterrestrial mudball". "It's dominated by a bit of iron, oxygen, magnesium, aluminium and calcium – that's probably worth one dollar, two if I'm generous." *BBC News*, 22 Nov 2020.



# BEASTLY BEHAVIOUR

Bad news boars in Thailand and Israel, camels on the loose in Russia, and mysterious orca attacks off Spain



ABOVE: Wild boar have reclaimed the streets of Haifa; not all residents are happy. RIGHT: A Russian television reporter tries to avoid the rampaging camel gang.

## BRAZEN BOAR ATTACK

Three farm workers harvesting corn in a field near Thailand's Thap Lan National Park were ambushed by a herd of wild boar that suddenly appeared from the bushes. A witness described hearing the men's yelps and shrieks as around 12 of the territorial boars, which were reportedly living in the cornfield, suddenly attacked them without warning, injuring a woman and two men. Two of the three victims sustained serious injuries and were taken to hospital. The boars apparently vanished as fast as they appeared. Local police have cautioned people to be on the alert and to steer clear of the animals if sighted. *nationthailand.com, 5 Nov 2020.*

## HOGGING HAIFA'S STREETS

More boar-related hi-jinks took place 10 months earlier, in Haifa, Israel, after a hunting ban was enacted. Residents of the northern city complained of wild pigs blocking traffic, digging up public gardens and overturning large rubbish bins. Dozens of boar apparently

*"They've turned our lives into a nightmare," one woman shouted*

invaded Haifa as soon as the culling ban was in place. A fierce debate then erupted between animal rights defenders and those who favoured driving out or killing the beasts.

Haifa is situated at the foot of the Carmel Mountains, home to boar, foxes, jackals and other species, all of which are protected under Israeli law. Residents said they were accustomed to seeing boar enter the city at night searching for food and water, but since the change in the law, locals complain that the animals have become increasingly brazen. Haifa's mayor, Einat Kalisch-Rotem, defended the culling ban on the basis that the wild boar are part of nature. They have no

natural predators in Haifa, so their numbers can grow rapidly.

A visiting film crew observed a group of boar crossing a road in mid-morning, unphased by traffic or people. One male boar even mounted a female in a public garden. "They've turned our lives into a nightmare," one woman shouted. Resident Ilana Dihno, one of the organisers of an anti-boar protest, told reporters that the animals used to stay out of the city until night, but were now walking around in broad daylight. "We chose to live in a city, but we live in a jungle," she added.

Although no recent cases of boar attacks on humans had been recorded, their sheer size intimidates some residents, as they can grow to up to two metres (over 6ft) in length. Mainly feeding on plants, berries and fruits, boar are adaptable scavengers and, like the UK's urban foxes or the USA's raccoons, thrive on human leftovers.

Haifa residents were divided on the boar issue. Some feared their children might be at risk if they attempted to play with a piglet and thus aggravate the mother boar. Others admitted to feeding the animals, saying they had been displaced by human activity. "They are looking for a place to be," said one woman. "They were here before us."

The boar issue arose after Kalisch-Rotem's 2018 mayoral victory and the culling ban, prior to which hunters were periodically allowed to shoot them and keep numbers down. Haifa's city council sought to encourage tolerance of the animals, publishing a song on its Facebook page in which a group of children profess their love for the boar, with lines like: "A Haifa girl isn't afraid of two tusks and hair like a

brush, she says good morning to the neighbourhood boar". *timesofisrael.com, 16 Dec 2019.*

## CAMEL INVASION

In August 2020, 80 camels invaded three Russian villages in the Astrakhan region after their elderly owner had allowed them to roam free. The irascible two-humped animals were accused of breaking down fences, trampling through gardens, damaging gas and water pipelines, and stealing fruit from trees. Some villagers claimed they were too scared to leave



their homes because of the rampaging camel gang: "If you look one directly in the eyes... the animal chases you, and you have to run away," said resident Yelena Bakhtemyeva. "When a herd walks, it sweeps away everything in its path."

Officials say the camels' former owner, Yuri Serebryakov, 83, had released the animals because he was getting too old to look after them. He has refused to take responsibility for their behaviour and is instead trying to sell them for nearly £700 (\$900) each. "I won't give them away," he told national TV station Rossiya 1 after it was suggested he should hand them over to a zoo. "It's too late for that."

The local prosecutor's office is now investigating a complaint about "illegal grazing of camels" from the villages of Oranzherei, Fyodorovka, and Ninovka. "It has been established that the camel breeder abandoned animal husbandry," a spokesman told the TASS news agency. "The rest of the circumstances will be clarified during the prosecutor's check and compliance with the legislation governing the procedure for keeping and grazing farm animals." *Independent, 1 Aug 2020.*





## ORCA REVENGE

Killer whales have been ramming sailing boats off the coasts of Spain and Portugal, and scientists are baffled. From the Strait of Gibraltar up the Portuguese coast to Galicia, orcas have been harassing yachts, damaging vessels and injuring crew. During July and August 2020 several distress calls were sent by sailors after incidents such as boats losing part of their rudders or a crew member bruised from the impact of the ramming. Several boats sustained serious damage.

A recent incident occurred just off La Coruña, on the northern coast of Spain. Halcyon Yachts was taking a 36ft (11m) boat to the UK when an orca rammed its stern at least 15 times, causing the boat to lose its steering. It had to be towed into port to assess the damage. Around the same time there were radio warnings of orca sightings 70 miles (113km) south, at Vigo, near the site of two recent collisions. On 30 August, a French-flagged vessel radioed the coastguard saying it was “under attack” from killer whales. On the same day, a Spanish naval yacht lost part of its rudder after an orca encounter.

Orcas, or killer whales, are the largest member of the dolphin family, and are highly intelligent and social mammals. Each September, orcas make their way up the coast from the Gulf of Cadiz into the Bay of Biscay, chasing tuna. Researchers studying a small orca population in the Strait of Gibraltar have said they are curious animals, and that it’s normal for them to follow a boat closely, even to interact with the rudder, but never with the force and aggression displayed in these incidents.

Recent reports from sailors around the Strait suggest that at least one pod appears to be pursuing boats. While the reason for this “highly unusual” and “concerning” behaviour is not yet clear, scientists have suggested that an endangered

population might enact stress by means of such aggressive actions.

On 29 July, off Cape Trafalgar, a 46ft (14m) delivery boat was surrounded by nine orcas, who rammed the hull for over an hour, spinning the boat 180 degrees, disabling the engine and breaking the rudder. All the while they had been communicating with loud whistling and the captain believed the attack had been “totally orchestrated”.

Earlier that week, another boat in the area reported a 50-minute encounter; the skipper said the force of the ramming “nearly dislocated the helmsman’s shoulder.”

At 23.30 the previous night, British couple Beverly Harris and Kevin Large’s 40ft (12m) yacht was suddenly brought to a halt, then spun round several times; Ms Harris said she felt the boat “raise a little”. Earlier that same evening, Nick Giles was motor-sailing alone when he heard a horrific bang “like a sledgehammer”, saw his wheel “turning with incredible force”, disabling the steering as his 34ft (10m) yacht spun 180 degrees. He too said he felt the boat lift, and described being “pushed around without steering” for 15 minutes.

The attacks are continuing. On 22 September, yacht owners

Graeme Walker and his wife Moira, together with their friend Stephen Robinson, were 720 miles (1,160km) into a 1,600 mile (2,575km) journey from Almerimar, near Granada in southern Spain, to the Clyde coast of Scotland. Mr Walker said he felt a sudden jolt while at the helm of the 48ft (15m) yacht, before he spotted first one orca, then another. “We realised they were after the boat,” which, he recalled, began rocking and spinning around. During their 45-minute ordeal off Cape Finisterre, the trio prepared the life raft, later discovering a 1.5sq ft chunk of the yacht’s fibreglass rudder had been bitten out by the orcas. “I felt a thump on the boat and the helm was pulled out my hand,” Mr Walker explained. “I was not really sure what was happening, then one of the animals broke the surface, on the left-hand side of the boat, for breath.” He believes two juvenile orcas were responsible for the initial attack, but that a third, bigger one later joined in. “None of us have ever been through anything like this before,” he added.

It is not yet known if a single pod was responsible for all these encounters, but Dr Ruth Esteban, who has studied the Gibraltar orcas extensively,

believes it unlikely that two separate groups would display such unusual behaviour.

One group of scientists investigating the attacks has since suggested that the unusual behaviour may be a form of revenge for injuries inflicted on other killer whales, whether intentionally or by accident, by humans. They believe they have identified three orcas, which sustained injuries to their flanks between 20 June and 3 August; these injuries did not appear to be the kind of habitual damage the animals sometimes sustain through accidental brushes with fishing lines. The vast majority of the incidents took place after this time, leading researchers to suspect there is a connection and that the orcas are retaliating aggressively to the pain they suffered. “Since that event, a series of behaviours have been triggered when the orcas are in the presence of yachts, which culminate in a preventive action to stop it moving by manipulating [the rudder],” the scientists’ report reads. They also believe that this particular pod of orcas was involved in 61 per cent of the 33 attacks reported in the area since late July. *Guardian*, 13 Sept; *D.Telegraph*, 23 Sept, 6 Oct; *BBC News*, 25 Sept 2020.



ABOVE: Orcas have been ramming boats off the coasts of Spain and Portugal – could they be mounting revenge attacks?





## Arthurian legend tripping

ALAN MURDIE asks if you've heard the one about the four Millwall supporters and Cadbury Castle



ABOVE: A view across the ramparts of Cadbury Castle hillfort, Somerset, one of the traditional sites of King Arthur's Camelot.

From time to time it does one good to relax the exacting standards of psychical research and allow a little informality to enter into proceedings. This can be best achieved by occasionally setting out to visit a haunted place primarily in a spirit of fun, as a form of adventure or relaxation.

On 24 June 1987 I spent a warm and balmy night camped out overnight with three friends atop Cadbury Castle hillfort at South Cadbury in Somerset. This impressive ancient earthwork rises up from woodland and opens out into a grassy plateau commanding fine views over the Somerset countryside and out across to Glastonbury 'the Isle of Avalon'. Traditions date back to at least Tudor times regarding Cadbury as the original site of King Arthur's court of Camelot. The date selected, as it is Old Midsummer and the feast of John the Baptist, the night when folklore avers ghosts of King Arthur and a retinue of mounted knights ride forth from the fort. Some say Arthur appears as a very tall man riding a white charger, and that the tips of the lances of the knights burn with eldritch flames. That would be a most formidable sight to behold.

I recall a wonderful balmy evening, with the Sun just having set as we climbed the

### The ghosts of King Arthur and a retinue of mounted knights ride forth from the fort

hill. Ascending the thickly wooded path to the banked summit was to grope one's way through a blackness that was biblical, the darkness penetrated only by the gleam of a couple of feeble electric torches. Reaching the top under the starlight, we found all was perfectly still. Below was the dark Somerset countryside swathed in sleep, here and there punctuated by the twinkling glows of distant artificial lights.

Once encamped, and duly honouring antique customs, we shared a mediæval-style picnic banquet of roast venison, pigeon capons, herrings and other victuals. We washed down this feast with copious quaffs of wine, ale, and mead. A plate of lampreys regrettably proved unobtainable – even Harrods Food Hall telling us, "We only use them for display purposes". Despite these preparations and the expectant atmosphere,

we didn't see or hear the ghosts of Arthur or any of his knights.

Indeed, it was perhaps a good thing we did not turn up the night before. One variant tradition holds Arthur appears on St John's Eve, 23 June. Anyone he meets, if not of perfectly pure life – a stringent standard to measure up to – will be struck dead. Other lore moves his haunting to mid-winter, averring the King and his knights come 'riding down from Camelot' to drink at a spring by Sutton Monks Church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

This legend is still evolving; a local walker interviewed by Penny Billington for the BBC Radio 4 'Ramblings' programme broadcast on 22 February 2020 stated that King Arthur and his knights ride out from Cadbury Castle to Glastonbury Tor "every Hallowe'en". Altogether, our casual vigil was an example of what American folklore scholars' term 'legend tripping' rather than any serious investigative effort operating within the framework of scientific methodology. But on occasion the light-hearted atmosphere, even a somewhat uninhibited one achieving a relaxation of the mind, has been considered conducive to psychic receptivity and the triggering of strange experiences.





The following account of an experience at Cadbury Castle was vouched for by one of the individuals involved; for reasons that will become apparent, he prefers to remain anonymous.

On 29 August 2011, a group of four Millwall football supporters, all men in their 40s from east London, were returning home from a match in Plymouth. Their team had triumphed and, after indulging in modes of celebration customarily practised by football fans and avoiding unwelcome attention from aggrieved Plymouth Argyle supporters, they set off on the second stage of their planned entertainment for the night. This had been proposed by a neo-pagan member of the party, who had suggested that they divert their journey home to go to Cadbury Castle, climb to the top of the earthwork and consume some magic mushrooms he had brought along for the thrill of the experience. Taken by this inducement, his three friends readily agreed, arriving at South Cadbury in the early hours of the morning. They scrambled up the hill and pitched a tent. Once inside, all four men proceeded to consume the mushrooms with relish. Almost immediately they began to experience powerful sensations.

All four men became aware of an intensely sinister and frightening atmosphere, concentrated on an area close to where they had erected their tent. This spot seemed to radiate hostility; a sensation so strong that one man stayed quivering in the tent throughout the night. Another, who had carelessly allowed his sleeping bag to roll down an incline into this zone, was too scared to attempt to retrieve it.

Venturing into the open air, three of the men had the first of a series of vivid hallucinations, seeing the ground appearing to be writhing with black snakes. Additionally,

my informant, the neo-pagan, experienced a vision of the earth itself opening beneath him into a yawning chasm (what he termed “the rabbit hole” – shades of *Alice in Wonderland*), cleaving all the way down to the centre of the hill.

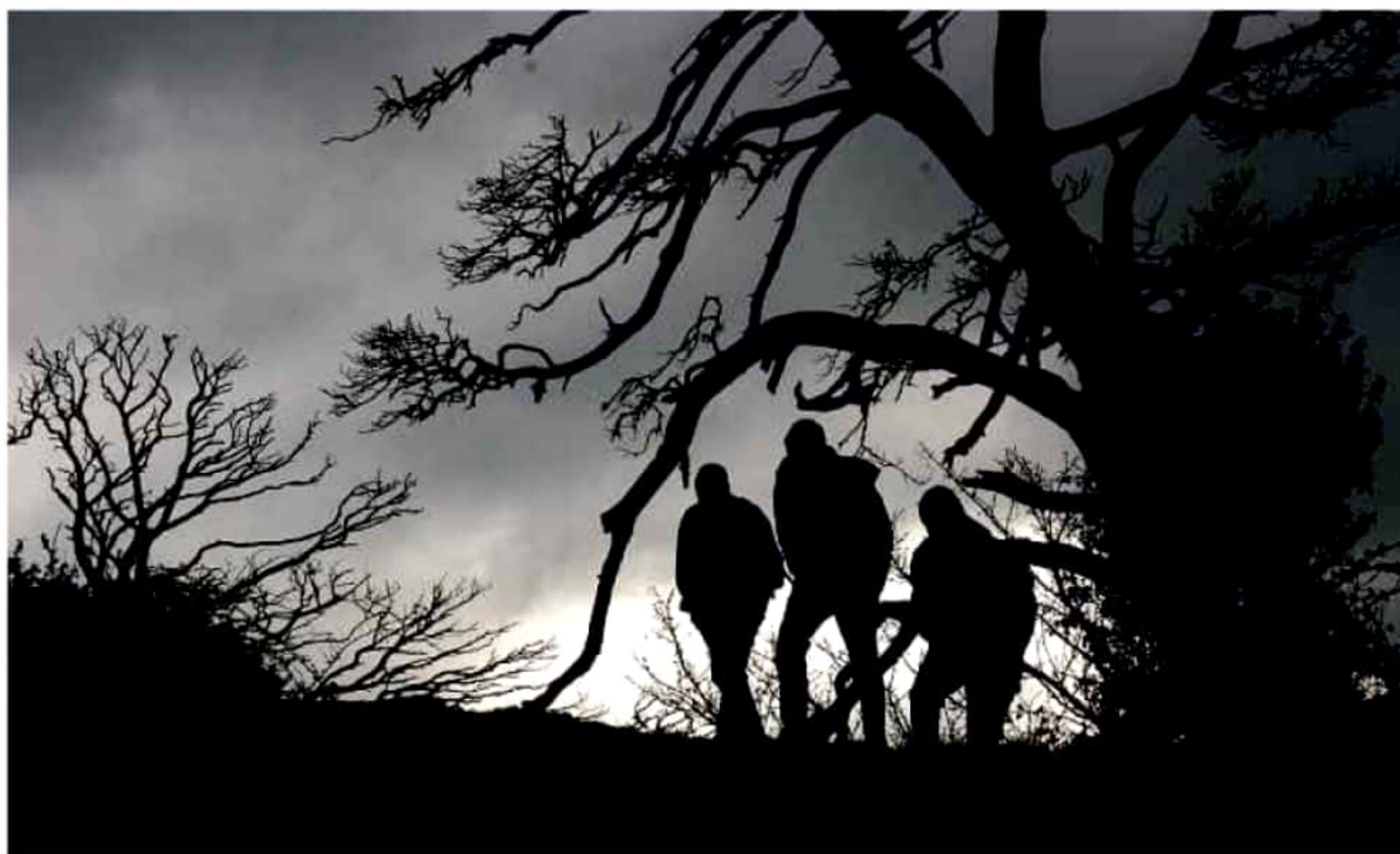
All three men then saw the site become alive with numerous moving points of flame and light, crossing repeatedly back and forth across the area within the earth ramparts. What seemed to be campfires appeared on hills in the distance. Of the trio my informant experienced the most detailed vision, perceiving the lights as the flames of torches carried aloft by a crowd of dark-haired Celtic women and children dressed in ancient clothing. The women were smiling and repeatedly crossing back and forth over the hilltop. The earth ramparts also appeared as they might have done

centuries before, topped with a wooden palisade fence on which other static burning torches were affixed. He then found himself approached by three male figures that he interpreted as Celtic warriors. One carried a spear that was offered to him.

His two companions could only make out the moving points of flames, but were unable to see the figures bearing them. Later, however, one of them underwent a disturbing vision, seeing what looked like the bloodied corpses of dozens of dark-haired women scattered around the enclosure, apparently victims of a massacre.

My informant then had a vision of a large, white-furred wolf bounding towards him. This signalled the onset of powerful physical reactions within his own body where he seemed to be transforming into a wolf himself. Succumbing to the sensation, he dropped to the ground on all fours and began issuing guttural sounds and growls. Alarmed by his behaviour, his two friends called out to him. Their voices had the effect of bringing the sensations of transformation to an end. He recalls at that moment he welcomed the sensations, wanting to embrace them, overcome by a pleasant and seductive impression of himself running free like a wolf.

The cumulative effects of these powerful hallucinations took its toll on the nerves of all four of these robust and seasoned Millwall supporters as the night wore on. Throughout these experiences the air seemed filled with an eerie, howling sound, alarming them all. Fortunately, just as their fear seemed to peak, their visions began to fade in intensity – but this relief was only temporary for moments later, as they emerged from their trances, they were struck by what they perceived as the finale to the phantom pageantry on the hilltop. A fierce windstorm erupted, seeming to be



TOP: An aerial view of Cadbury Castle. ABOVE: The hillfort is an ideal location for tripping of all kinds.





# GHOSTWATCH

targeted on them. The trees shook and all three struggled to remain on their feet as a series of fierce gusts struck the hilltop, which forced them to cling on to the tent to prevent it from blowing away.

The wind then subsided, and they attempted to sleep. Each arose the next morning rather like the bridegroom in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, "a sadder and a wiser man" on "the morrow morn"; unsurprisingly they were considerably shaken and felt that their activities had "conjured something up". Yet this was not the end. Driving through Frome (where one of them had previously lived as a child), all four fleetingly glimpsed a figure of what they interpreted as the apparition of a Druid, hovering in mid-air above a building. This was the last collective experience of their adventure.

Some six months later, my informant went to a jumble sale in east London, where he picked up *By South Cadbury, that is Camelot* (1972) by Leslie Alcock, the archaeologist who led a series of excavations at Cadbury Castle between 1966 and 1970. These revealed a multi-period site, with over 1,200 years of occupation from prehistoric times and stretching into the post Roman era. He learned that around 500 BC a wooden stockade had been erected, which was replaced over the years. He also discovered that the area that had felt so hostile was the place where a group of skeletons was unearthed, apparently victims of a massacre in Roman times.

Leaving aside the vexed issue of the recreational usage of drugs within materialistic Western societies and the legal and ethical aspects of this story, the transcendent experiences reported by the

four men are very interesting.

Although not inspiring any cult of Millwall shamanism, all four men remain convinced they experienced a kind of time-slip, induced by their consumption of the mushrooms, enabling them to see Cadbury Castle as it had once been at different periods in the past.

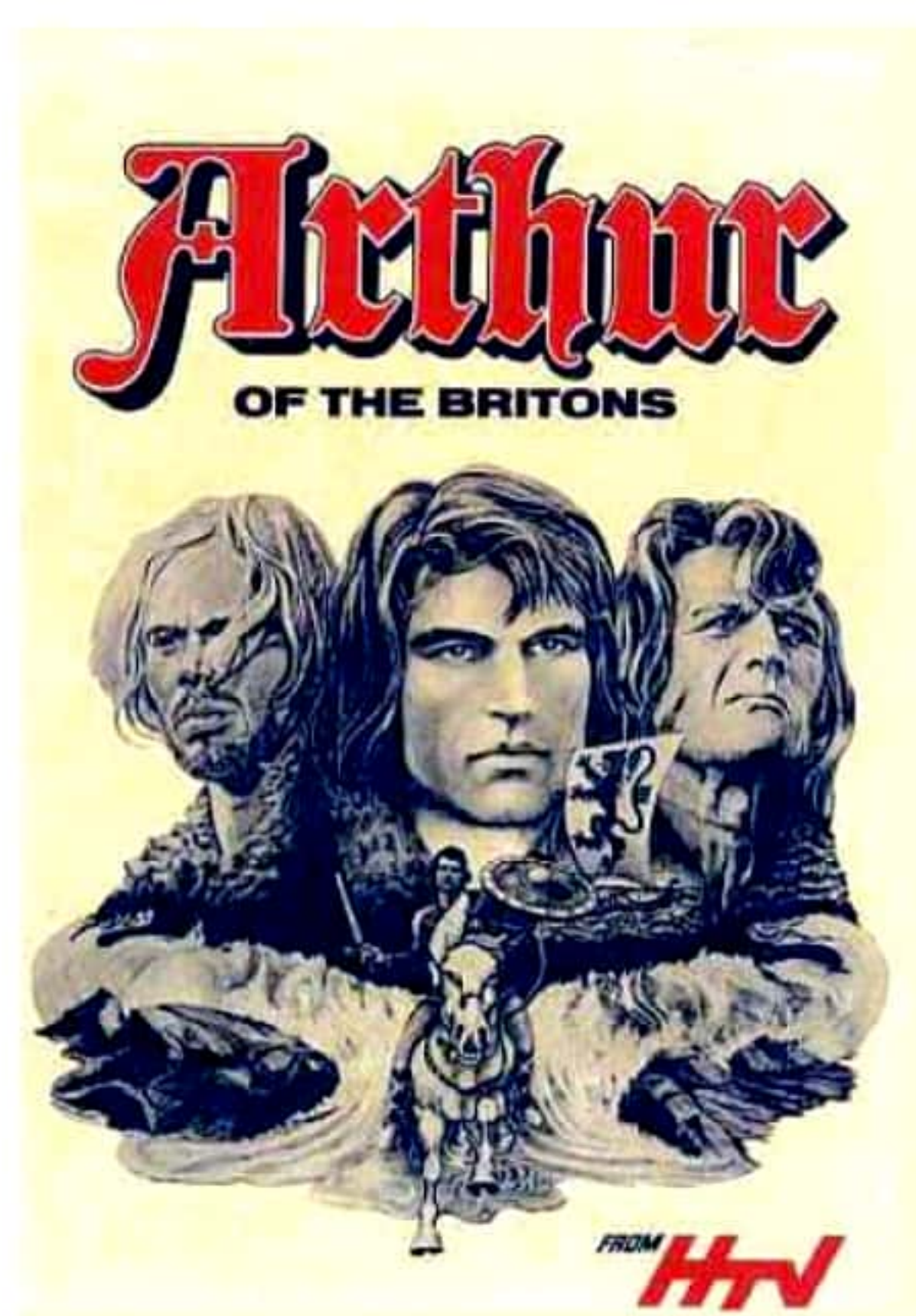
Of course, such an assessment of their vision must be tempered and qualified by the fact that all four had ingested a powerful psychotropic substance in uncontrolled conditions. Any witness who is under the influence of drugs, including many obtainable on prescription, may suffer distortions of perception and hallucinations that cast doubt on any claim of having undergone a paranormal experience (aside from distortions of memory and narration). Just this suspicion may be raised with some of the many mystical experiences and trances reported by visitors and inhabitants in the Glastonbury district, not far from Cadbury Castle, since the 1960s (see for example the experiences claimed by an unnamed man recorded by Nick Redfern mentioned in 'The Gargoyle of Glastonbury', **FT187:30-35**).

But what is interesting is the degree of internal consistency and shared similarity found in some stories, a factor that would ordinarily run contrary to pharmacological expectations. Hallucinations induced by psychotropic substances cannot be created to order, are rarely structured and would be likely to vary considerably between individuals, even with identical dosages. The botanical species concerned may play a part with content (there are 53 varieties of sacred mushroom recognised in Mexico alone, with those from the north of the country

considered different in effects from southern varieties). Effects in the brain may be supplemented by rituals featuring powerful social and cultural triggers and symbols, which can result in high excitement. Existing psychological imbalances can enhance the chemical effects, but the precise mechanisms remain opaque.

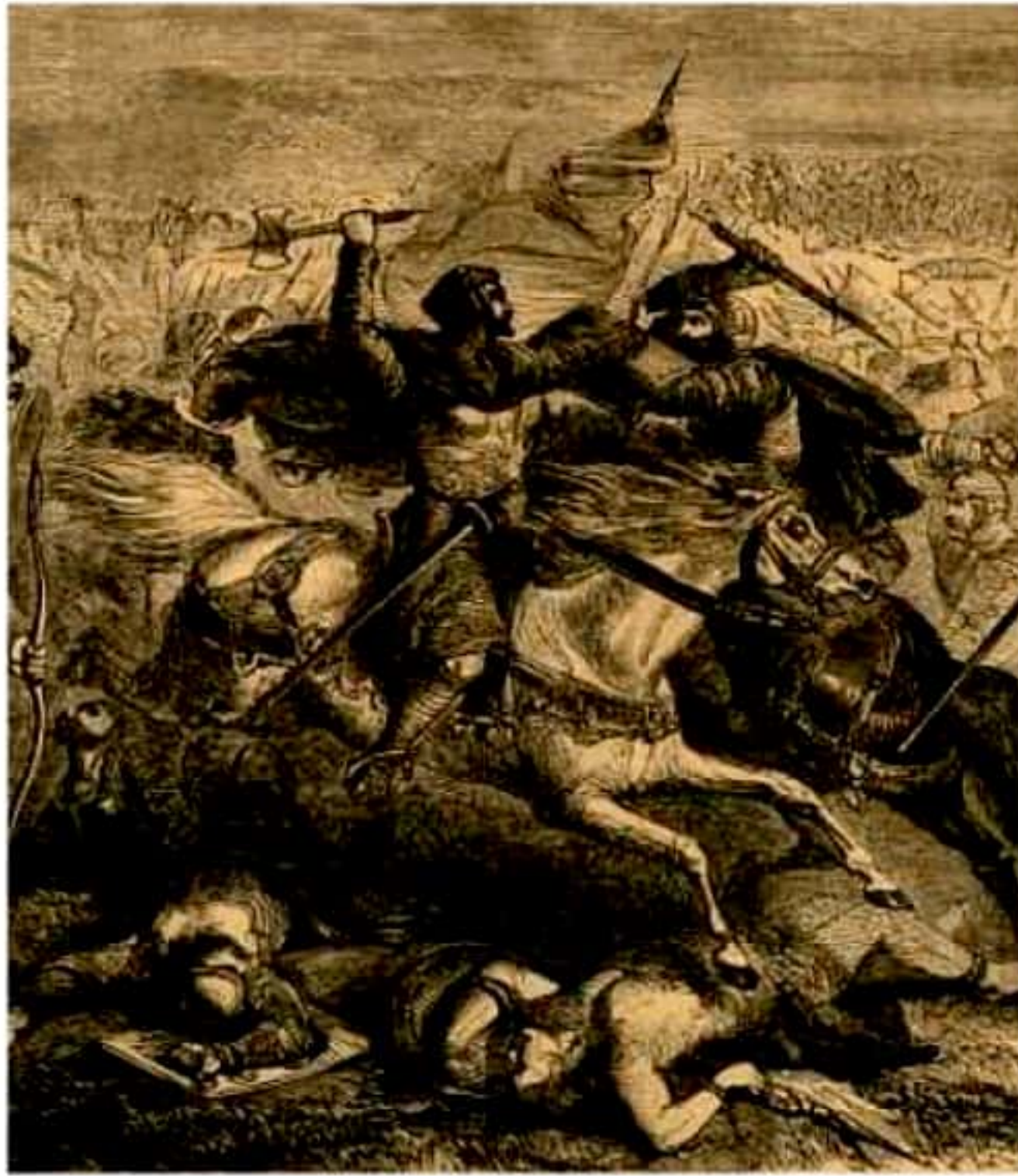
The subject is a multi-disciplinary one encompassing biochemistry, medicine, religion, and anthropology, with the literature often involving charts and chemical formulæ more complicated than a bookmaker's tax return. (See 'Hallucinogenic Mushrooms in Mexico: An Overview' by Gastón Guzmán *Economic Botany*, v.62, no.3, Special Mushroom Issue (2008), pp404-412 for a short summary of sources).

Thus, if the accounts of the four Millwall supporters are accepted, the striking similarity of their experiences at points might suggest a portion of their visions were not solely attributable to the effect of the mushrooms. It might be proposed that as experiences they took imagery from their own subconscious minds, but to suggest a culturally inspired hallucination (the psychosocial hypothesis) is to raise as many problems as it purports to solve. For instance, given the Arthurian associations, why was the imagery in their visions not more in keeping with popular cinematic and media depictions of King Arthur and his knights to which the men were likely to have been exposed? Of the four men, only my informant specifically identified with pagan ideas. I asked him if he had ever seen a TV series, *Arthur of the Britons*, made by broadcaster HTV and transmitted between 1971-72. This jettisoned much of the Arthurian mythos and attempted to supply



**ABOVE LEFT:** An advert for the 1970s HTV series *Arthur of the Britains*, which presented a more authentic picture of life in 'Arthurian' Britain; the Millwall fans had no recollection of it. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Arthur's Stone, on the Gower Peninsula in South Wales, is said to be haunted by an armoured spectre.





**ABOVE LEFT:** Arthur defeats the Saxons at the Battle of Badon. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Badbury Rings, possible site of the battle and of modern Arthurian hauntings.

a more historically accurate portrayal of fifth and sixth century life in Britain, but he didn't recall seeing it. Furthermore, he maintained his more detailed knowledge of the history and archaeology of the site was only acquired subsequently because of his experiences.

Nor is it the case that time-slip experiences necessarily need stimulants or narcotics to induce them, or require Cadbury Castle as a backdrop. This is just one of the many potential resting places of Arthur, other early sources holding the grave of Arthur was unknown or secret. 'Anoeth bid bet y Arthur' (*Black Book of Carmarthen*) variously translated as 'Concealed till Judgment Day – the grave of Arthur'. Unique among the long-departed kings and queens listed by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) (*History of the Kings of Britain*), Arthur and his role as a leader who would one day return, becoming the 'Once and Future King', taps into archetypal ideas of renewal and rebirth – see Geoffrey Ashe, *The Vision of Albion* (1976). Since then, the myth has been endlessly revised and embroidered.

Visions of what appear to be ancient and later mediæval warriors have been reported, occurring spontaneously to percipients in Scotland, including at Nectanesmere in Angus and around Loch Ashie (see 'They Tell of Fighting Phantoms' by M Letheringham, *General Practice*, 25, 6 Nov 1970; 'A Vision of the Aftermath of the Battle of Nechtanesmere AD 685' by James McHarg, *SPR Journal*, 1977-78, v.49, no.778; *A Phantom Battle Near Loch Ashie in the Scottish Highland* by Peter A McCue (2004) *SPR Journal*, v.68, no.875).

Consequently, there are many sites where one could seek out ghostly echoes of King Arthur, the very fluidity of traditions

## “What place would be more appropriate for King Arthur to haunt than Badbury Rings?”

enabling a widespread geographical distribution of sites carrying his name or commemorating the legends – for instance, Arthur's Seat outside Edinburgh, the Eildon Hills, at Gloucester, Winchester and many other places (see *King Arthur's Country*, 1926, by FJ Snell). In the early 13th century, commoners in both Britain and France reported seeing processions of spectral courtiers or knights, both by day and night, led by a figure claimed to be King Arthur.

Wales and the West Country contain the biggest concentration of Arthurian ghosts and survival legends. On the Gower Peninsula is a cromlech known as Arthur's Stone (with another candidate for Camelot being postulated at Caerleon in Gwent). When the Moon is full, a spectre in armour, believed to be King Arthur, is said to walk down to the shore. (See *Mysterious Britain*, 1972, by Janet and Colin Bord). Going to Tintagel, one can wander the crags and dizzying tops of the sheer cliffs, hoping for a vision of a warrior in the clouds and, once a year, a city appearing out at sea. A cloud figure has also been reported at Glastonbury Tor, appearing when England is in danger. ('The Wild Hunt and the Witches' Sabbath' by Ronald Hutton: *Folklore* Aug 2014, v.125, pp161-178; *Arthurian Tradition and Folklore* Roger S Loomis in *Folklore* 1958, v.69, 1-25; *This Haunted Isle*, 1984, by Peter Underwood).

Concerning Badbury Rings hillfort in Dorset, the naturalist R Bosworth Smith in

his delightful *Bird Life and Bird Lore* (1908) mentions a belief (also found in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) that Arthur takes the form of a raven. Badbury Rings is identified as a possible site of Mount Badon (Mons Badonicus) the battle that held the Saxons at bay for 20 years. "What place would be more appropriate for King Arthur to haunt, during his intertival state, than the scene of his greatest victory, Badbury Rings?" he asked. No bird was said to sing at Badbury Rings on account of the slaughter, ravens being an exception, as they croak rather than sing.

Noting ruefully the redundancy of a belief that "No Englishman would kill a raven for fear it might be Arthur", Bosworth Smith confessed his own sin, telling of a hair-raising story of how as a schoolboy he had raided a raven's nest at Badbury Rings on a snowbound day in the freezing winter of 1854-55 scaling a 60ft (18m) pine tree, using nails driven into the trunk as footholds to steal the eggs, and with croaking ravens circling around. Despite his theft, ravens nested most years thereafter either at Badbury Rings or nearby Kingston Lacy, encouraging a superstition that the land would remain safe. By 1968, the fully materialised ghosts of King Arthur and his knights were said to appear, according to an article in *Dorset Life* magazine by Rodney Legg (see **FT399:16-19**).

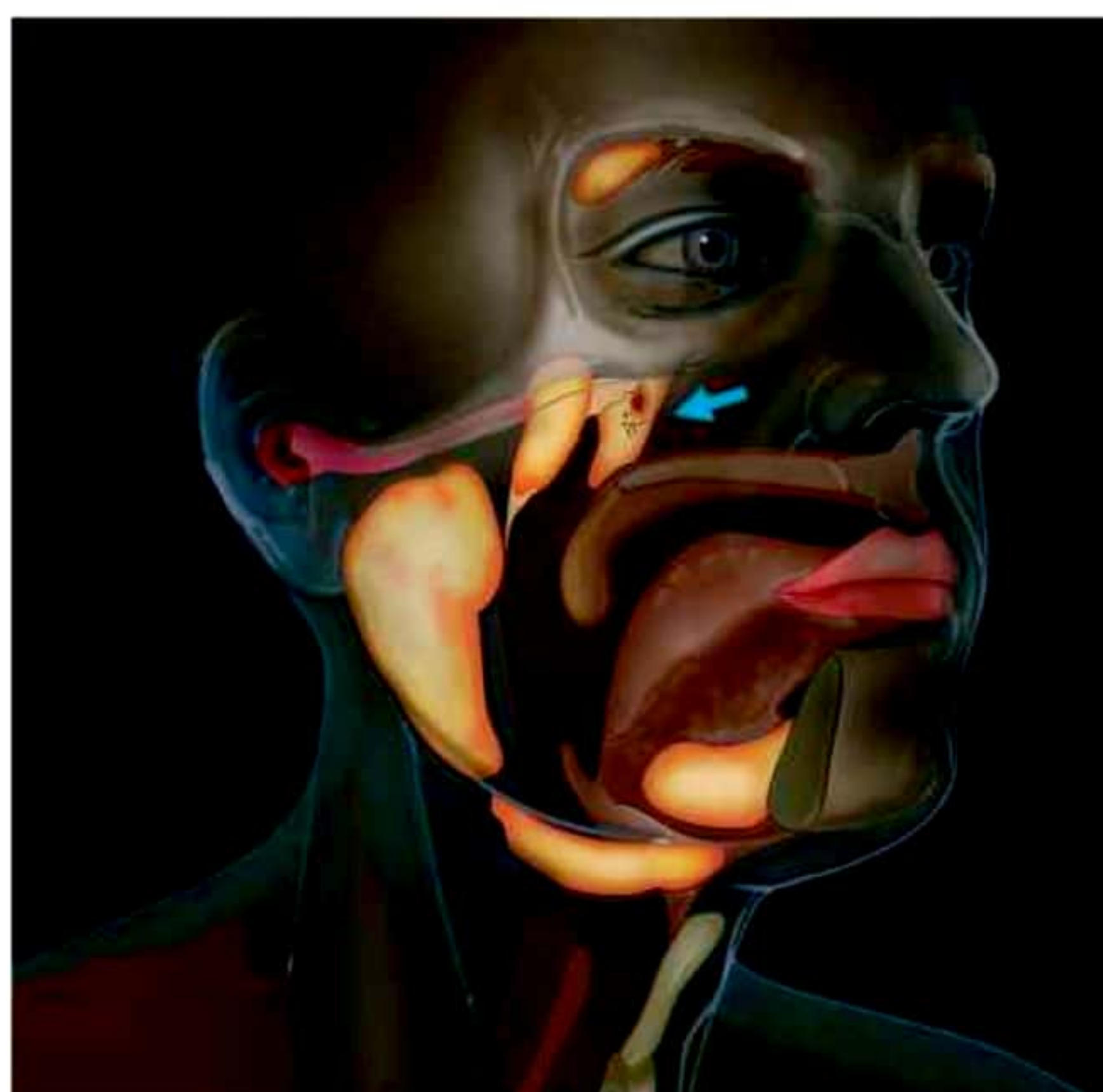
"That there is something eerie, the silence of the place is certainly palpable," Philip Sheldrake wrote more recently (see 'Place, Person and the Sacred' in *India International Centre Quarterly* v.26/27 no.1: Faith – Winter 1999/Spring 2000).

Given King Arthur's enduring symbolism as a returning hero and saviour in times of national crisis, I for one will not be surprised if we hear more claims of his reappearance any day now.



## MEDICAL BAG

Another casebook of curiosities: brand new gland, law exam labour, human micro-evolution, and the perils of Covid-19 swab testing...



**ABOVE LEFT:** The tiny saliva-producing glands discovered by researchers in the Netherlands have remained undiscovered for centuries. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Brianna Hill, who went into labour in the middle of her bar exams.

### SALIVA GLAND SURPRISE

Medical researchers in the Netherlands have made a surprise anatomical discovery, finding what appears to be a pair of salivary glands hidden inside the human head, somehow overlooked by scientists for centuries.

The 'unknown entity' was discovered accidentally when doctors were using an advanced type of scan called PSMA (prostate-specific membrane antigen) PET/CT (positron emission tomography/computer tomography) to examine prostate cancer patients. When used in conjunction with radioactive glucose injections, this diagnostic tool identifies tumours. However, in this case it highlighted something quite unexpected, nestled in the rear of the nasopharynx (the upper part of the throat, behind the nose) close to the centre of the head.

"People have three sets of large salivary glands, but not there," explained radiation oncologist Wouter Vogel from the Netherlands Cancer Institute. "As far as we knew, the only salivary or mucous

glands in the nasopharynx are microscopically small, and up to 1,000 are evenly spread out throughout the mucosa. So, imagine our surprise when we found these."

The three major salivary glands (the parotid, submandibular, and sublingual) produce most of the saliva essential for the digestive system to function. Additionally, there are approximately 1,000 minor salivary glands situated throughout the oral cavity and the aerodigestive tract, but these are generally too small to be seen without a microscope. The new discovery made by Vogel's team is much larger, and is ostensibly the fourth set of major salivary glands.

Oral surgeon Matthijs Valstar of the University of Amsterdam explained that the two new areas highlighted by the PSMA PET/CT scan appear to have the characteristics of salivary glands, and so they have been named the tubarial glands, referring to their anatomical location above the torus tubarius (a ridge in the nasopharynx just behind the opening of the auditory tube).

These tubarial glands were found in the scans of all 100 patients examined in the study. Physical investigations of two bodies (one male and one female) also showed the mysterious bilateral structure, revealing macroscopically visible draining duct openings towards the nasopharyngeal wall. "To our knowledge, this structure did not fit prior anatomical descriptions," the researchers explained. They suggested that the structures had hitherto been overlooked due to their poorly accessible location under the skull base. In addition, only recently-developed imaging techniques such as PSMA-PET/CT that go beyond the visualisation capabilities of ultrasound, CT, and MRI scans have allowed such a structure to be identified as a salivary gland.

The research team believe their discovery is another target to avoid during radiotherapy treatments for cancer patients, as salivary glands are highly susceptible to damage from the therapy. Preliminary data appear to support the conclusion that radiation

delivered to the tubarial glands region results in greater complications for patients afterwards. "It seems like they may be onto something," said pathologist Valerie Fitzhugh from Rutgers University. "If it's real, it could change the way we look at disease in this region." *sciencealert.com*, 20 Oct 2020.

### PREGNANT PAUSE

An Illinois law student undertook part of her bar examination while in labour, paused to give birth, then recommenced and completed the exam. Loyola University graduate Brianna Hill thought she would be six months' pregnant while taking her final examination before qualifying as a lawyer in July, but owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, the date was postponed until October.

Students sat the exam remotely in their own homes. On the Monday, a very pregnant Ms Hill sat down at her desk and began the first part of the examination. "I was ready to go – confident," she said, but minutes later, she went into labour. "I didn't think about it because I was in the test." During a break, she made some phone calls and then went back to complete the rest of her exam. "I cleaned myself up, called my husband and the test kept going," she said.

Several hours later she gave birth to a healthy son, Cassius Phillip, at West Suburban Hospital in Oakpark, Illinois. But Ms Hill still had to take the second part of the exam, which she tackled the following day while still in hospital. "I woke up and they set up a spare room for me," she explained. "They put a 'Do not enter' sign on there." She breastfed during breaks and eventually completed her exam. She doesn't yet know if she passed, but should get her results in early December. *nbchicago.com*, 9 Oct 2020.



## LOSS OF WISDOM

Scientists in Australia have discovered that humans are undergoing a micro-evolution in which physical changes are observable over a short period. Modern babies are being born without wisdom teeth as humans continue to evolve at a rapid rate, according to an Australian study. Dr Teghan Lucas of Adelaide's Flinders University said faces are becoming a lot shorter and with smaller jaws, which means there is less room for teeth. It is thought this is the result of humans having learned to use fire and to process food rather than eat it raw. The research also found that some people are being born with additional bones in their arms and legs, or with abnormal connections of two or more bones in their feet.

The study, led by Dr Lucas together with University of Adelaide Professors Maciej Henneberg and Jaliya Kumaratilake, showed a "significant increase" in the prevalence of the median artery since the late 19th century. This artery forms when a baby is in the womb, and is the main vessel supplying blood to the forearm and hand; it usually disappears during gestation, to be replaced by the radial and ulnar arteries. Increasingly, however, the median artery is being retained, so that a person can have all three arteries. The study's authors claim this evolutionary trend will continue to be seen in those born 80 years from today, by which time the median artery will become a common feature of the human forearm.

The study demonstrated that humans are evolving at a faster rate than at any point in the past 250 years; changes in natural selection are suggested as the major reason for such micro-evolution. *Irish Examiner*, 9 Oct 2020.

## BRAIN LEAK

A woman in her 40s went to her doctor after experiencing a runny nose, headache, stiff neck and a metallic taste in her mouth. During her assessment, she told the doctor that she had recently been tested for coronavirus, prior to a hernia operation, and that the nasal discharge, headache and vomiting had commenced shortly after the surgery. She was referred to the University of Iowa Hospitals, where a mass was discovered in the middle of her right nasal cavity. After medics drained the mass, tests showed that it contained a protein found in cerebrospinal fluid. It was later established that during her coronavirus test, the swab had been inserted so far up her nose that it had caused her brain to leak. The test, which employs a long cotton bud to take a swab of the back of the throat and another from the inside of the nose, is the most common method used to test for antigens, the presence of which indicates the subject is currently infected with coronavirus. The doctors' report, published in *JAMA Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery* stated: "Complications associated with nasal swab testing are not well characterised," adding that, to their knowledge, this is the first case of its kind. The woman was admitted to hospital for endoscopic surgical repair. *D.Mirror*, 3 Oct 2020.



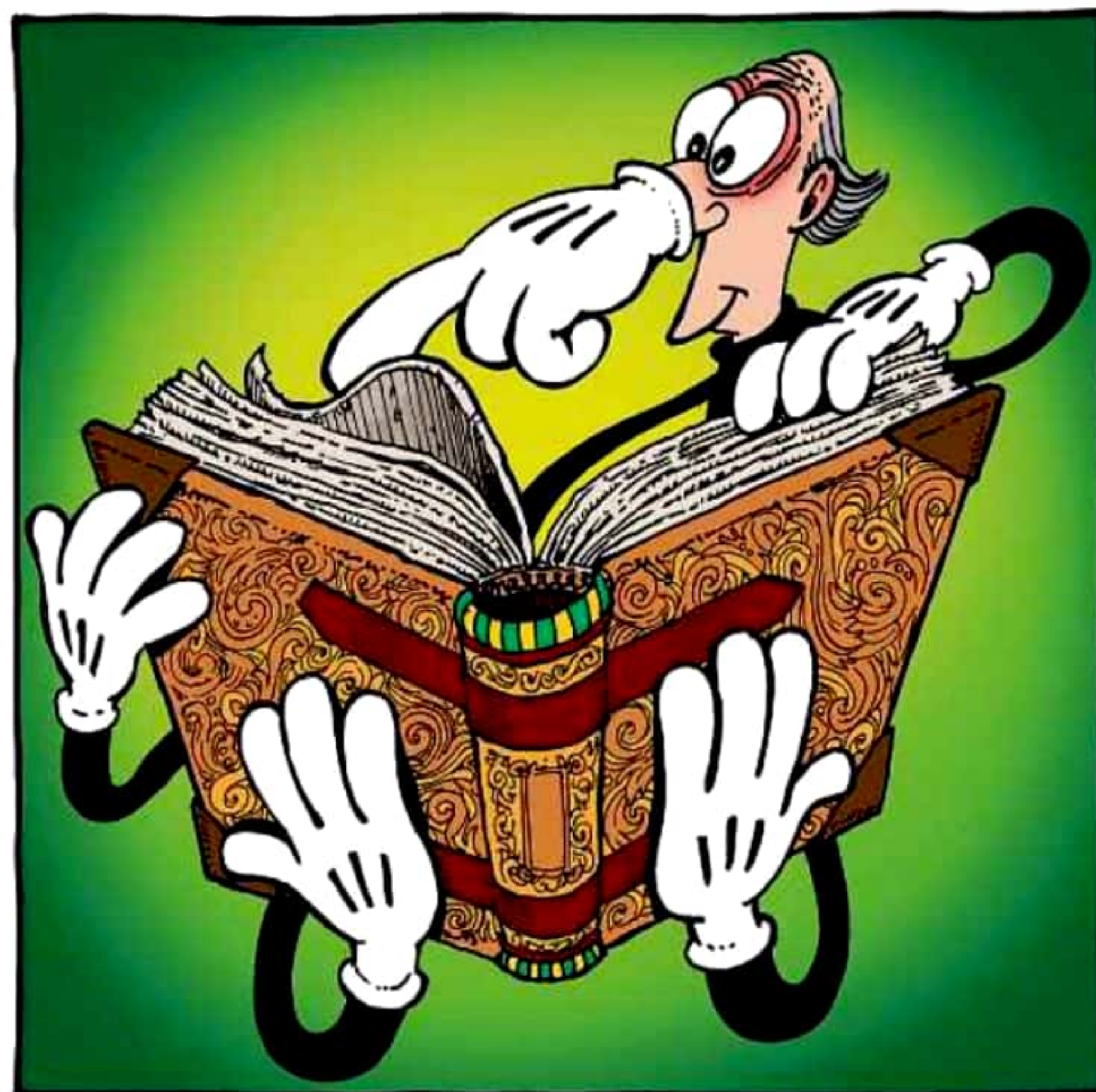
ABOVE: Careful with that swab, Eugene! One woman's Covid-19 test saw a cotton bud inserted so far up her nose that it caused her brain to leak.

SEAN GALLUP / GETTY IMAGES

# MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

## 256: WHITE GLOVES



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

### The myth

When handling old, rare, precious, delicate books and other paper documents you should always wear gloves.

### The "truth"

On telly, the gloved archivist reverently hands the mediæval manuscript to the gloved celebrity and they only take their gloves off when they're safely out of the reading room. But such august paper-keepers as the National Trust, the British Library and the Smithsonian Libraries all ban gloves, and insist instead on bare hands, which are thoroughly cleaned before, and even at intervals during, the handling of the books. Gloves inhibit the dexterity and sense of touch of their wearers, thus making them more likely to tear a page. They are more slippery than naked hands, so risking fumbles and drops. Fragments of pigment are more likely to stick to a glove than to skin, and gloves can transfer dirt, or leave their own fibres on the page. Gloved hands are sweaty and that moisture can penetrate the glove material and get onto the paper. The only time gloves are likely to be worn is to protect the wearer against dangerous pigments, such as arsenic, or to avoid skin oils reacting with photographic or metallic treasures. On TV, of course, the gloves act as a signal to the viewer: this book is fragile and priceless.

### Disclaimer

If you're a document archivist who gets through more sets of white gloves than the average snooker ref, do tell us we're wrong.

### Sources

<https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2019/11/21/no-love-for-white-gloves-or-the-cotton-menace/#.X8eISbOnzVJ>; <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2011/08/white-gloves-or-not-white-gloves.html>

### Mythchaser

While we're on the subject of gloves, and hands scrubbed raw, which of these is true: that people working in sandwich factories are required to glove-up for reasons of hygiene; or, as we've been told, that they are ordered not to wear gloves, because it's been discovered that clean hands are more hygienic?





# THE CONSPIRASPHERE

**NOEL ROONEY** is distinctly unimpressed by the recently touted efforts of AI analysts to separate ‘real’ conspiracies from ‘democracy-threatening’ conspiracy theories...

## TRUTH BOFFINS

The news that AI boffins have created an algorithm that can tell the difference between conspiracy theories and real conspiracies was greeted with a peal of hollow laughter in this particular garret of Fortean Towers. Leaving aside the painfully obvious observation that many conspiracy theories are, in fact, theories about real conspiracies – and thus there is no hard line between the two categories – one has to ask what would motivate a team of pointy-heads to tilt at this particular windmill.

The answer, it transpires, is that tired old academic cliché about the conspiracy theory world: the threat to democracy. The perception that conspiracists pose a real and present danger to the pillars of the respectable world is the driver for a whole raft of well-intentioned – and ultimately silly – initiatives in academia. This newest effort to identify, isolate and, presumably, nullify the threat is novel only in that it uses the tools of Big Data extraction to hunt down the terrifying spectre of strangeness nestling like an evil cuckoo in the cosy, bubble-filtered confines of social media.

In all other respects, it's the usual psychology-based, generalist view of the Conspirasphere being trotted out again, with the added Jack Horner flourish of data nerds cooing, “look what our algorithms can do!” Cathy O’Neil’s characterisation of algorithms as “an opinion formalised in code” has rarely seemed more apposite. The academic (and media) view of those who pay attention to conspiracy theories as patients of a particular pathology was already pervasive; now it has the bonus of its own version of targeted advertising to recommend it.



## *This newest effort uses the tools of Big Data extraction*

The author of the *Daily Kos* article on the algorithm, David Neiwert, does at least start by admitting that there are such things as real conspiracies. But then he goes on to ask, “How can we distinguish them from the utterly fabricated fantasies that comprise the entirety of the conspiracy-theory universe?” Here again we come across the blanket discrimination that is the bedrock of the generalist view: conspiracies may (sometimes) be real, but all conspiracy theories are fantasies.

This cannot, logically, be true. The only reason we have conspiracy theories is because we have conspiracies; if conspiracies did not exist, neither would conspiracy theories. So there is clearly some connection between the two; separating them into such distinct categories is not a logical step, it's a sweeping dismissal of all conspiracy theories on the grounds that some are demonstrably untrue. To put it another way, it's a method of filtering by positing the outlier as the norm; since we

see flaky conspiracy theories created – and believed in – by nut jobs in tinfoil hats, all over the gleeful media, it's reasonable to assume that all conspiracy theories are flaky and obviously untrue.

But back to the article, and the wonderful new algorithm. Niewert explains the parameters used by the boffins to set up the filter (which oddly enough reflect his own published views on the matter); a list of qualities characteristic of, first, real conspiracies, and then conspiracy theories. The first category is reasonable, if not comprehensive: conspiracies have narrow goals, a short time span, and involve only a “tiny handful” of people. How one would go about searching for those qualities in a fog of social media comments is not explained, unfortunately; I suspect the answer might be grounds for some amusement.

The second list is less an accurate description of all conspiracy theories and more a beermat description of the grand narrative version as Niewert and his nerdy colleagues see it: they are broad-ranging and involve a massive plot to enslave humanity; they have been going on for hundreds, if not thousands, of years; they involve a huge number of people, often in high positions in government or the bureaucracy; their long-term success is “always credited to willing dupes in the media or elsewhere”.

Armed with this GIGO menu of presumptions, the algorithm is let loose upon the world of social media and – hey presto – soon returns with a rich harvest of confirmation bias. Conspiracy theories, we are told, “are collaboratively constructed and develop in the open”. Is it just me, or is this actually a description of a meme, or what in the

analogue world used to be known as gossip? Skipping over the rather obvious historical fact that most classic conspiracy theories did not begin as collaborative constructs on social media, but were rather the obsessive, usually clandestine, work of individuals, we can see here a conflation that gets us nowhere in terms of understanding conspiracy theories or why so many people credit them with some element of verity.

The ‘collective storytelling’ and ‘collaborative construction’ that is described here is not the process of theorising, and it's most certainly not the process of conspiracy theorising. It's the standard process of narrative building in the online world (and in practically any form of online community one can think of). There is nothing here that distinguishes conspiracy theory from the plethora of meme-driven narratives that float like gossamer ghosts across the virtual landscape on a daily basis. And nothing that connects these digital ephemera to the 200 years or more of pre-Internet conspiracy theory, which still, at least in the grand narrative sense that Niewert insists on, underpins most of the conspiracist narratives that dominate the Conspirasphere.

I can't help but feel that, in a world that relies on this kind of flaky scholarship to gauge truth value, the threat is not so much to democracy as to tangible reality. Strange times.

**SOURCES:** [www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/12/4/2000010/-Analysts-create-AI-tool-that-can-distinguish-between-conspiracy-theories-and-real-conspiracies](http://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/12/4/2000010/-Analysts-create-AI-tool-that-can-distinguish-between-conspiracy-theories-and-real-conspiracies); [www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/9/15/1977645/-Red-pills-and-radicalization-New-book-explores-how-conspiracism-is-overwhelming-us](http://www.dailykos.com/stories/2020/9/15/1977645/-Red-pills-and-radicalization-New-book-explores-how-conspiracism-is-overwhelming-us); Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Allen Lane, 2016.



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## STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN rounds up the weirdest news from Europe, including curses and bosom serpents



ABOVE LEFT: Social distancing among the considerably reduced pilgrims at Medjugorje in 2020. ABOVE RIGHT: The mysterious BVM statue at a German motorway lay-by.

### BAD YEAR FOR BVM

Due to the Covid pandemic, crowds can no longer assemble at Marian apparition sites. Mirjana Dragicevic-Soldo, one of the Medjugorje (Bosnia Herzegovina) visionaries, was visited by the Virgin on 18 March 2020 and learned that she would no longer receive monthly visits. Until then, the Blessed Virgin Mary had appeared to her on the second day of every month since 1987. And on 13 October, instead of the usual crowd of over 100,000 devotees, only 4,500 people assembled in Fatima, Portugal, on the anniversary of the Sun miracle there in 1917. *katholisch.de*, 19 Mar; *katholisches.info*, 14 Oct 2020.

### OUR LADY OF THE LAY-BY

In addition to apparitions that draw huge crowds, there are always the more private BVM visits – often not acknowledged by the Church, and sometimes farcical. At Ansbach, Bavaria, a 70cm (28in) statue of the Blessed Virgin with the baby Jesus in her arms, mounted on a concrete block, was reported by travellers at the Kurzmandl-Ost lay-by on the A7 motorway near Würnitz. Nobody knew

who had erected the memorial, or why, and after five days police started an investigation and published a photo of the statue. There were fears that the Madonna had been stolen from a church or was perhaps a valuable art object. Police soon traced the original seller, a woman who had offered the BVM statue for sale on the Internet for 270 Euros. The buyer, a 54-year-old man, was apparently disappointed with his purchase and threw the Virgin into a rubbish bin at the motorway. There, an unknown finder must have decided to rescue the statue and to mount it where he found it. It has now been removed from the lay-by and resides in the Ansbach police station. *nordbayern.de*, 2 July 2020.

### RUSSIAN BOSOM SERPENT

The old tale of the woman who swallowed a snake when asleep in a meadow was reborn with an alleged TV news item from Russia. According to numerous outlets on the Internet, a woman with stomach pain was to be operated on in a hospital in the Russian republic of Dagestan, in the North Caucasus, where a medical

assistant pulled a 1.20m (4ft) snake out of her mouth. At first, she didn't recognise what she was holding in her hands, but when the snake began to writhe, the medic gave a shriek and let the snake fall to the ground. The hospital has denied that the operation ever took place, and it is obviously a fake – a modern-day meme using the age-old myth of the bosom serpent. The Health Minister of Dagestan has called for an investigation to trace the origin of the video. *rtl.de*, 4 Sept 2020.

### CURSED ARTEFACTS

Yet another long-established tale is that of the tourist who keeps something from a temple or from a mountain sacred to a god, only to find misfortune haunting them until they return the stolen item in a parcel. A Canadian woman “recently” sent back artefacts she had kept as souvenirs 15 years ago from the Roman city of Pompeii, near Naples. In an accompanying letter to Italian police, she said they had caused her nothing but bad luck. The woman, who identified herself as “Nicole”, said she had been “young and stupid” and “wanted to have a piece of

history that no one could have.” However, “I just want to shake off the curse that has fallen on me and my family.” The newspaper *Il Messaggero* quotes the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, which said this was not a new phenomenon. For years, they have received parcels and “hundreds of letters from all over the world” with antiquities stolen from the site that have brought their new owners nothing but bad luck. Said a spokesman: “The value of the latter is not significant in itself, but the letters accompanying the return are interesting from an anthropological point of view, and in a sense they tell another story of Pompeii.” *foxla.com*, 14 Oct 2020.

### GERMAN SPOOK HOUSE

Germany does not have a strong modern tradition of ghost encounters, so few stories ever make it into the media. In June 2020, though, local newspapers reported a “ghost house” in Waghäusel in Baden, in the south of Germany. The Schönborner Jagdhaus is a hunting lodge from 1755 with many tales attached to it. It was later transformed into a cigar factory and is now a normal





family home. According to local knowledge, it has underground passages that are haunted. Witnesses confirm that “in the last century” people still made the sign of the Cross when they walked or drove past the house. “The building opposite the road, the Rose Inn, which today houses an animal shelter, is still considered to be haunted by some of the people in the region.” Current owners of the lodge, William Lee and Susanne Bowers, both IT experts, told the paper they are open-minded: “We have not yet noticed any ghosts but we too have heard the rumour that skeletons haunt the passage to the old fort in the night.” *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, 26 June 2020.

## ALIEN ARTEFACT

A video showing a claimed alien artefact or crashed saucer has been released by the newspaper *Echo Dnia*. The footage was shot by Wojciech Domagała, a reader of the newspaper, near Swietokrzyskie, in south-eastern Poland near Ruda Zajaczkowska and Gniezdziska in the commune of Łopuszno; it shows a forest area full of litter, but also a large, rusty, bell-like object reminiscent of the object that allegedly crashed at Kecksburg, Pennsylvania, in 1965 (FT171:18, 179:22, 206:27, 360:28).

Mr Domagała’s letter appears to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek: “A UFO landed in the forests of Swietokrzyskie! ... I have also photographed alcohol bottles – the aliens must have had a drink too many...” Domagała said the object was quite large and reminded him of the “pear” of a concrete mixer. “It is unknown who abandoned this item and when,” says the paper. “Empty bottles of alcohol are scattered nearby. In July of last year, Minister of the Environment Michał Woś announced an increase in penalties for littering in forests. According to the new regulations, the fine for such an offence may be as high as PLN 5,000 [roughly £1,000].”



The article includes seven images, one of discarded bottles, the rest showing the strange object, but always from the same perspective. One would have hoped the witness might have walked around the alien artefact to take pictures from the other sides, too; but perhaps it is, as he implies, simply a rusty old concrete mixing unit from a construction truck. *echodnia.eu*, 10 Sept 2020.

## ART HEIST OR HOAX?

*Capri-Batterie*, a sculpture by famous German artist Joseph Beuys, vanished from an exhibition in Oberhausen on 22 October 2020. Soon the organisers received a message from the art collective Frankfurter Hauptschule, who declared they had stolen the work and shipped it to Tanzania where it would be exhibited

among traditional craft of the Hehe nation. They declared the theft was retaliation for the appropriation and mass theft of cultural goods from the Hehe of Iringa in colonial times. The Oberhausen Theater had not even noticed the disappearance of the sculpture. Frankfurter Hauptschule released a video ‘confession’ that seemed to show them taking the Beuys work to Africa, but a few days later, the piece was found in a warehouse in Münster, after a hint dropped by the art collective. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 23 Oct; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 Oct 2020.

## THE LAKE VAN MONSTER

An out-of-focus video clip taken with a smart phone is said to be the most recent evidence for the existence of a monster in Lake Van, in

LEFT: The ‘alien artefact’ in a Polish forest. BELOW LEFT: Frankfurter Hauptschule’s video confession – but was their art heist in fact a hoax?

easternmost Turkey. Züleyha Sona and her family went to the lake to spend a fun day there when they spotted several fast moving “spikes” protruding above the surface. Sona filmed the apparition with her cell phone and later told reporters: “My sister pointed out the object to me. It had spikes along the back and we ran in its direction to get a better view of it. My mother had already told me there was a monster in the lake, but we made fun of it. After I have seen this, I am a believer. I have seen it with my own eyes. It might not look to impressive on the video, but it was for me.”

Lake Van is so saline that only one species of fish, the Pearl Mullet, manages to live in its brackish water, and the “object” in the video looks suspiciously like a boat’s wake. Stories of monsters have been around for several hundred years, and videos taken since the 1990s, perhaps as part of attempts to exploit the ‘monster’ for tourism. *hurriyet.de*, 15 Aug 2020.

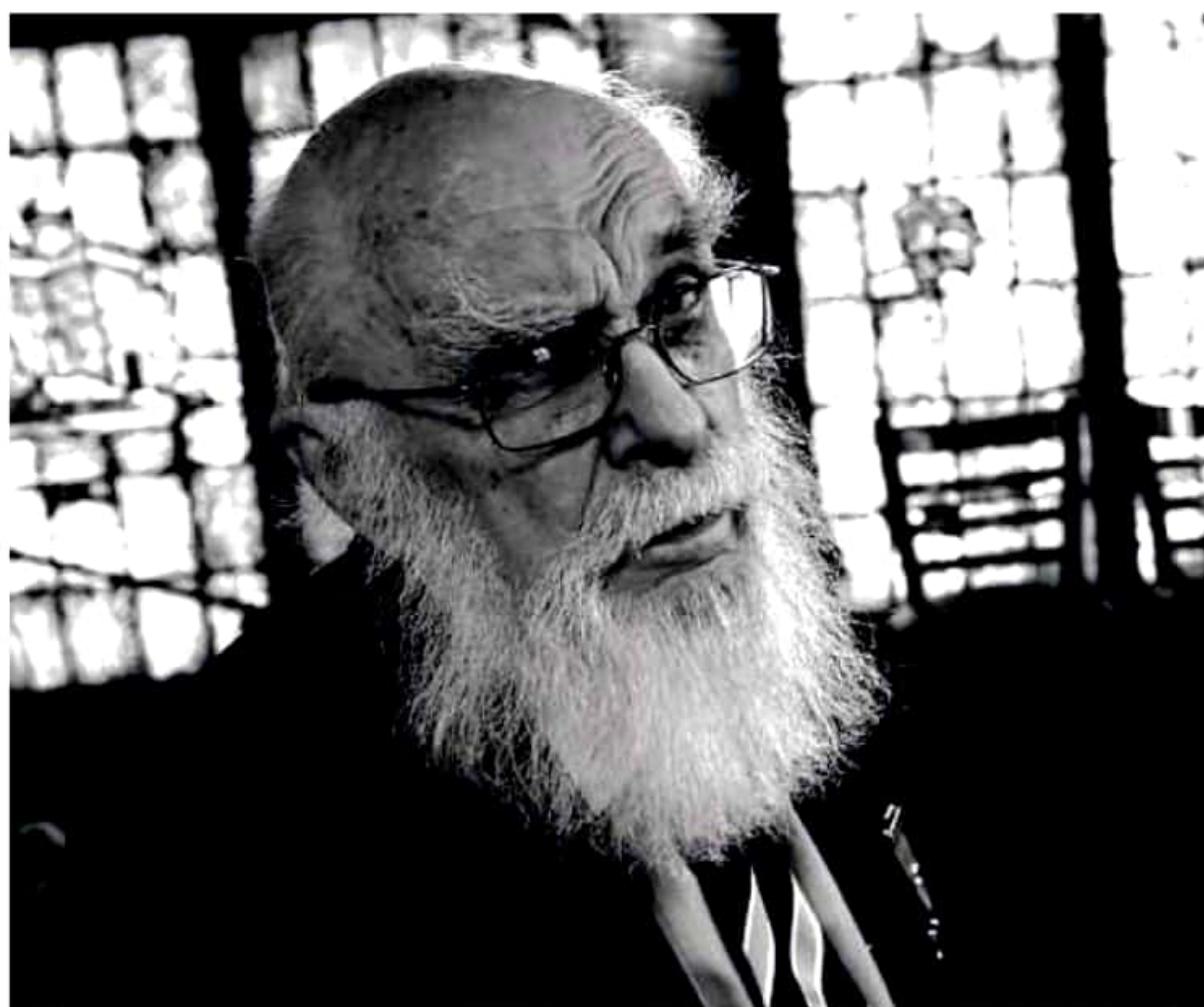
## MANHOLE MYSTERY

On 13 April 2019, a train driven by Thomas C crashed into two manhole covers suspended from a bridge at Bad Berleburg, Hesse, Germany, smashing the windows of the train. Police suspected a political terror attack, but after a year of investigation concluded that the driver himself had arranged the attack. He had hung several manhole covers on threads from a railway bridge in order to crash into them on his next journey. He had also deposited one manhole cover in front of a school to cast suspicion on the pupils. No motive was found for these actions. Early in October 2020, a court sentenced him for hazardous interference in rail traffic and for falsely reporting a crime. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 3 Oct 2020.



## NECROLOG

As a leader of the US 'skeptical' movement, a self-publicising showman and a sometimes unscrupulous enemy of 'woo', James Randi was a divisive figure.



### JAMES 'THE AMAZING' RANDI

James 'the Amazing' Randi was a professional magician, skilled escapologist, author and entertainer, a leading figure in the 'skeptical' movement for many years and a figure of considerable importance in the sociological study of the paranormal.

A slightly built man sporting a magnificent hallmark white beard, he proved a persistent media presence for over half a century after hitting upon challenging psychic claimants as part of a crusade against what he condemned as pseudoscience, quackery and gullibility on the part of the public and society at large. Lionised as a champion of truth and touchstone by skeptics and considered a pest of the first order by many others, over the years he proved a brilliant self-publicist and media personality who became internationally known for outspoken and brazen attacks on healers, fortune tellers, psychokinetic key benders, dowzers, ESP practitioners and housewives who claimed they helped solve child murders, upon all of whom he turned his basilisk glare. For many years he travelled the globe brandishing an increasingly dog-eared

cheque for \$10,000 announcing it would be payable to anyone who could convince him they truly possessed psychic or supernatural powers.

Born Randall James Hamilton Zwinge in Toronto in 1928, the son of a telephone company executive, Randi maintained he was a child prodigy of sorts. "I had a very nasty time of it as a child. There was no one to talk to. There were no special schools for children back then," he recalled in 1981. He found escape in libraries, museums and shows at the Casino Theatre where he witnessed a stage illusionist levitating a woman. Eschewing the offer of science scholarships, Randi left home at 17 to join a carnival. Here he donned a turban and grew a beard, adopting the persona of 'Prince Ibis' before becoming 'Randall the Telepath'.

Moving on to Montreal, he prospered on the nightclub circuit both as a traditional rabbit-out-of-the-hat magician and by posing as a 'thought-reader'. Modelling himself on Harry Houdini, whom he revered, he developed a repertoire of hair-raising stunts, including escaping from a straitjacket while being dangled upside down above Niagara

Falls. Later, in 1974, he achieved an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records* for being encased in a block of ice for 31 minutes. Doubtless many wished later he had remained in it.

Such feats led to successful appearances on American television during the 1950s and performances on a late night call-in show on a New York radio station in the 1960s. He discovered there were people who believed he really possessed psychic abilities, despite any denials (an experience shared by other stage magicians from Houdini to the late Paul Daniels). In the face of such public gullibility and inspired by Houdini's war on phoney Spiritualism in the 1920s, Randi settled in the USA and set upon a self-promoting career as a debunker – or as he termed it an 'investigator' – of psychic claims.

At this time he hit upon his longest-running gimmick, the offer of a financial prize for a successful demonstration of psychic powers. Over the decades, he insisted many hundreds of psychic claimants had taken the bait, but in the first 15 years only 60 passed preliminary tests to demonstrate any remote probability they could collect. Thereafter, he declared none even came close, or failed to turn up on the appointed day. Having sagely appointed himself as the sole rule-maker and arbiter, he confided to a skeptic friend, astronomer and historian Dennis Rawlins, that he had never considered his money remotely at risk, because "I always have an out". Meanwhile, he applied the interest earned on the sum to help pay off his mortgage on a mock-Tudor home purchased at Rumson, New Jersey, with a 'Wizard of Oz' doorbell.

This offer of a then valuable prize and his advocacy of brash skeptical polemics spiced up with conjuring tricks proved irresistible to TV shows,

succeeding in his dual objective of publicising himself and reducing any serious discussion of the paranormal to the level of a parlour game. What characterised Randi's brand of skepticism was not its wish to merely expose his victims as gullible but to gleefully insult and abuse them in a manner more suited to putting down hecklers on the nightclub circuit than anything approaching rational discourse.

Often, he was reckless of whether what he alleged or insinuated was actually true. Rather than seriously engage in debate, he preferred tub-thumping rhetoric laced with sarcasm. Remarks such as: "There's a great deal more evidence that Santa Claus exists. I've seen pictures and drawings of a fat man in a red suit – now if someone could only come up with a flying reindeer..." or speaking of unicorns and parapsychology in the same breath (he titled a 1980 book *Flim-Flam! The Truth About Unicorns, Parapsychology and Other Delusions*) typifying his stance as the snake-oil salesman of skepticism. At one time his Diners Club credit card was embossed with "James Randi, Professional Charlatan".

To remain constantly in the public eye, he keenly followed the latest fashion or trend in psychic affairs, targeting those attracting most media coverage and proving an adept practitioner in the stalking and smearing of reputations before the Internet was created.

Over the years, he zeroed in on a number of celebrity psychics, including US society clairvoyant Jeanne Dixon (FT243:32-39), Dutch sensitive Peter Hurkos (who claimed he identified the Boston Strangler; FT383:34), Peter Popoff (an evangelical faith-healer), Dorothy Allison (a New Jersey housewife who claimed to help solve the murders of



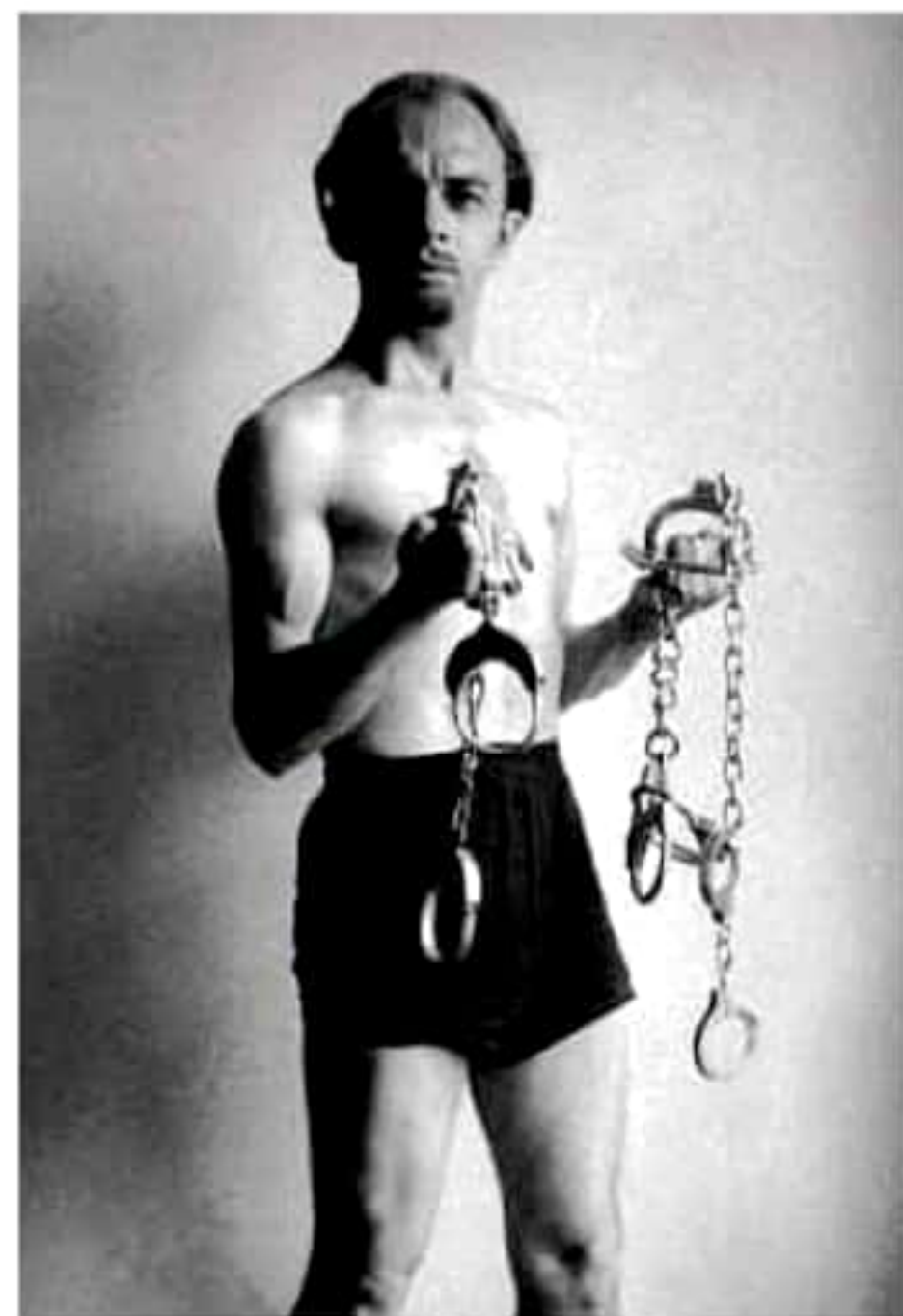


children), and Tamara Rand (a psychic who faked a broadcast forecast of the assassination attempt on President Reagan), and an eclectic range of others whom he variously labelled as “practitioners of ‘flim-flam’”, “psi-nuts” “the biorhythm crowd”, “half-astral projectionists” or simply fools or swindlers preying on the gullible.

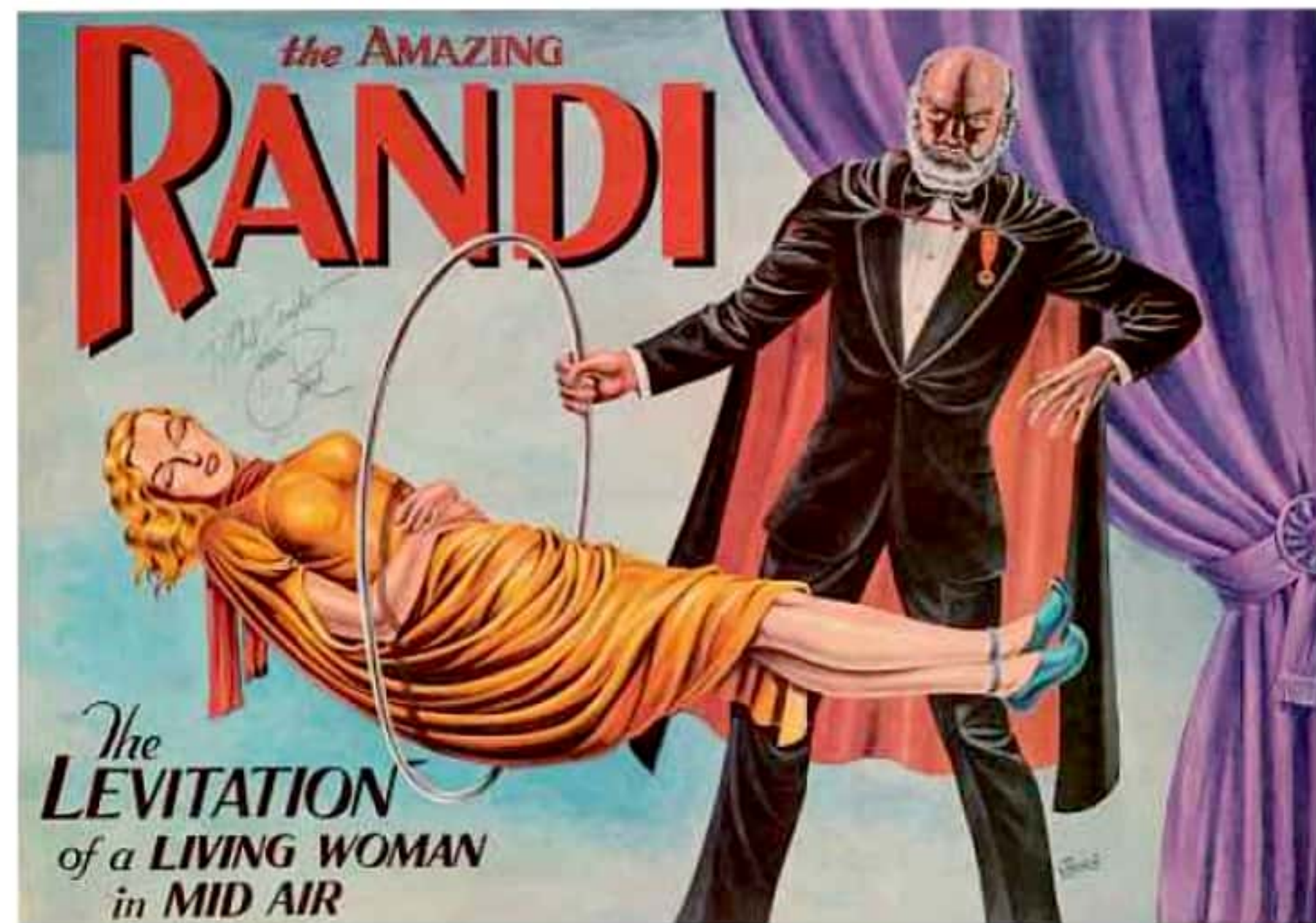
Most marked was his fixation on Uri Geller, which arose in the 1970s after the Israeli had impressed both scientists and a number of magicians with displays of metal bending and extrasensory readings. Randi dogged Geller on the TV talk-show circuit, replicating his apparent psychokinetic feats with sleight-of-hand and conjuring tricks and publishing an anti-Geller book, *The Magic of Uri Geller* (1975), lambasting the psychic personally and all those endorsing him. Geller in turn accused Randi of living off the back of him, whereas Randi initially justified his crusade on the basis that in one year he had lost \$15,000 in bookings as college students preferred to believe in Geller than pay him to perform. It was one of many claims, accusations and allegations exchanged between the two men in a 20-year feud that came to resemble the quarrel in *The Duellists* (1977) for its duration and bitterness, as the two slugged it out in various law courts in a series of costly suits that rolled on into the mid-1990s.

For these antics he came to the attention of a number in the scientific establishment and humanist organisations who recruited him to their own promotional work. In this, Randi served rather as a semi-licensed attack hound for certain intellectuals with materialist leanings and agendas (Robert Anton Wilson satirised this approach as “The Persecution of the Parapsychologists as performed by the Inmates of the American Association of Science under the Direction of the Amazing Randi”).

In July 1975 in London, Randi



ABOVE LEFT: The young Randi in Houdini mode. ABOVE RIGHT: A poster for The Amazing Randi's stage act.



was engaged by *New Scientist* magazine and conspired in hoaxing staff at the Spiritualist weekly newspaper *Psychic News*. Attending their offices, Randi bent forks and stopped watches. After the paper proclaimed the advent of a new Uri Geller under banner headlines, *New Scientist* mockingly revealed their hand in the affair, behaviour which psychologist Stan Gooch compared to stealing from a house where one is a trusted guest. The following year Randi was a co-founder of CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (now CSI, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry) along with a group of concerned scientists and humanist philosophers appalled by the public enthusiasm for UFOs, astrology, the Bermuda Triangle, Noah's Ark, and ESP, and who saw themselves as defenders of humanist and secular values combating the public fascination and acceptance of such beliefs.

Randi fully acknowledged this role as a hitman for skepticism while at the same time lambasting scientists, fellow magicians and journalists for being too restrained. “They won't stand up and say the man is an idiot, an incompetent or a liar,” he declared. “I'm not constrained by their restraints. The scientific world treats me like a

clown. I have no big academic credentials. I'm the comic.”

Even a number of his peers privately considered he had overstepped the mark when he infiltrated two amateur magicians into the McDonnell laboratory at the University of Washington to fake metal bending and disrupt psi experiments in 1979-81 and see if they would be caught. Randi justified it as “sociological research”, but it was behaviour most university departments eschewed as unethical. Staff did catch the boys being fraudulent on some occasions and found the apparent PK effects evaporated under scrutiny and disrupted the programme. Despite the researchers never publishing any formal endorsement of the boys' purported abilities, an unrepentant Randi called a press conference in New York to reveal the deception, leading to a wave of negative publicity. His mockery continued when he announced a set of spurious prizes for awards for outstanding performances in what he called “the pseudoscience of parapsychology” on April Fool's Day, via the magazine *Omni* for whom he had become a columnist. The brazen nature of these stunts and the vehemence and venom of his rhetorical assaults undoubtedly had the effect of intimidating some scholars and academics, but

proved hugely popular with a growing number of younger skeptical admirers, for whom Randi appeared to fulfil an emotional need.

In 1986 he was awarded a substantial grant by the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation for ‘socially useful work’. This funded travels for writing an indictment of faith healers and a book attacking astrology and interpretations of the prophecies of 16th century seer Nostradamus entitled *The Mask of Nostradamus* (1990), one of 11 books he produced over the years.

However, statistics in parapsychology baffled Randi (what he termed ‘card guessing tricks’ were excluded from his \$10,000 prize) and he was intellectually unable to refute the more technical papers as parapsychologists tightened controls and moved towards mass testing in group trials rather than experiments with individual ‘star psychics’, whom he had accused of being fraudulent imitators of conjuring and illusion routines.

Furthermore, on occasion tests instigated by Randi himself backfired or exposed the shallowness of his methodology. In the 1960s, he failed to replicate the phenomena of Ted Serios, who seemingly possessed an ability to imprint mental images on film under controlled conditions (FT256:52-55). Randi





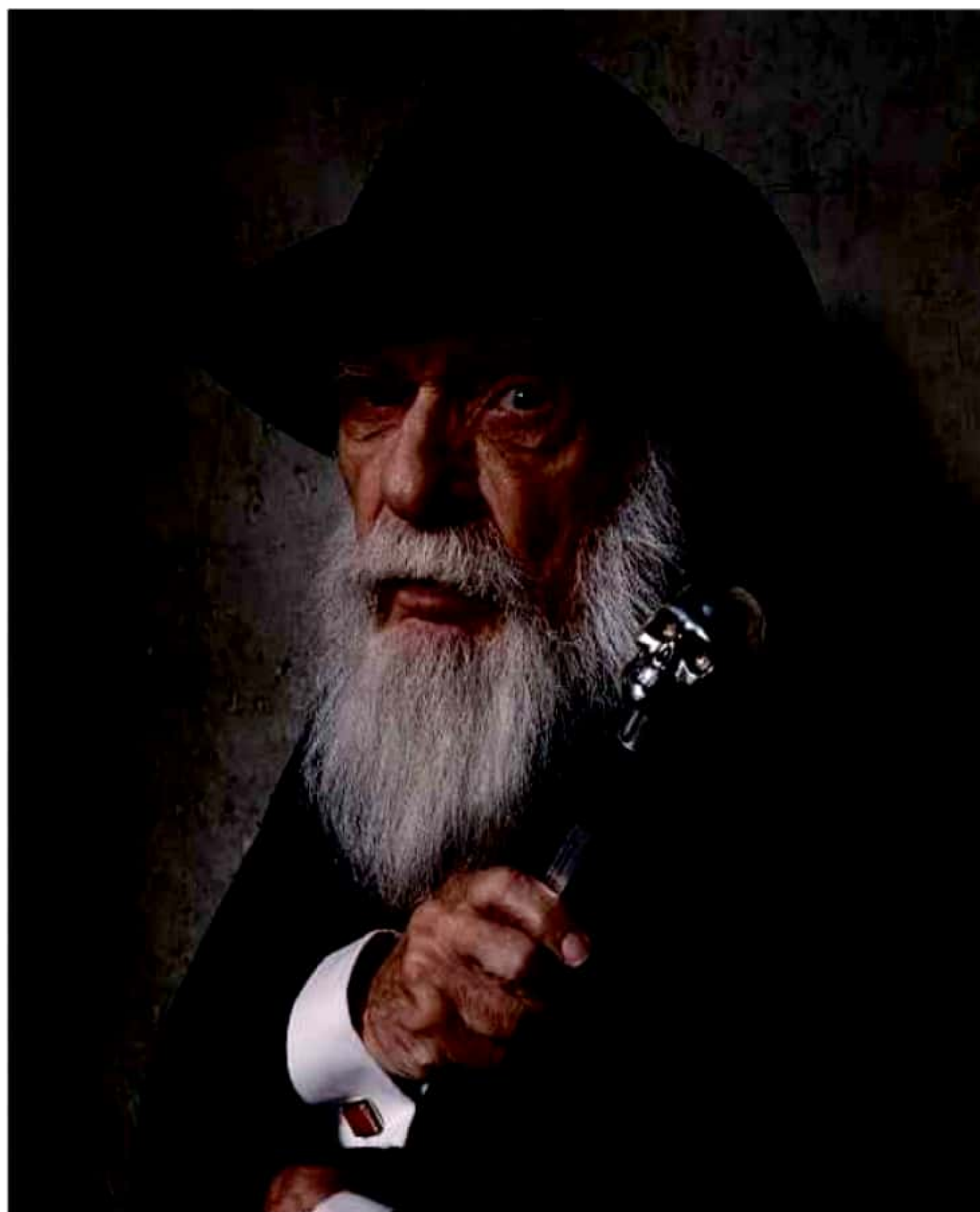
# STRANGE DAYS

LARRY BUSACCA / GETTY IMAGES FOR THE 2014 TRIBECA

backed out of doing so, pleading that he did not drink, whereas Series needed to swallow copious amounts of alcohol before creating his effects, whatever they were. In a field trial of dowser in the Australian outback in 1980, Randi muddled results for gold (negative) and water (positive) in the tests, committing an elementary statistical error which it was left to his friend Arthur C Clarke to point out (see 'An Element of the Divine', transmitted ITV 6 May 1985 as part of *Arthur C Clarke's World of Mysterious Powers*). In one episode of a British TV show, *James Randi Psychic Investigator* (July 1991), a map dowser upstaged him by correctly identifying a target square with odds of 24-1 against. In the book of the series, Randi declared testing would follow, but nothing did. Probably he would have excused it, saying all magicians have tricks that go wrong on occasion.

Occasionally the odd retraction did emerge regarding his errors and misinformation which he blamed on others (for example that there existed among a collection of memorabilia from medium DD Home a mouth harmonica suggesting he had faked spirit music; no such object was known to exist. His book *The Supernatural A-Z: The Truth and the Lies* (1995) has largely disappeared from circulation because of careless errors (e.g. listing Borley Church in Essex as 'Borley Abbey' and stating Harry Price's library contains "several volumes dealing with conjuring" when it constitutes one of the largest collections in the world).

The lengthy litigation with Geller took a toll. After Geller filed a suit in 1991 naming Randi and CSICOP, Randi resigned from the organisation; their founding member was now a legal liability. Geller's actions were eventually dismissed, and Randi's personal finances were revived with a further substantial grant in the 1990s, enabling him to launch the James Randi Educational Foundation and raise the



ABOVE: At the Tribeca Film Festival in 2014 to promote the film *An Honest Liar*.

\$10,000 prize to \$1 million.

The same barbed jokes and sarcastic sneers continued to be displayed, though increasingly it was playing to an audience. Beneath the showmanship it was possible to sense an undercurrent of anger and resentment that hinted at personal unhappiness and disappointments. Wendy Grossman – who was drawn into the skeptical movement by a Randi lecture and founded the UK magazine *The Skeptic* in 1987 – said: "Somebody like Randi frequently appears narrow-minded and bigoted to people simply because he's been investigating this stuff for 40 years, and after 40 years, you start to draw conclusions very rapidly, because you've seen a lot of cases that follow the same patterns".

Asked by Carl Williams about the gullibility of the public flocking to psychics, the bitterness slipped through: "They're looking for magical solutions. Hard work is the answer. And hard work doesn't

always work, because nature doesn't give a damn about you. Nature simply does what it does, and that's the way it is."

In 2000 his attack on the work of Rupert Sheldrake concerning psychic powers in animals was more reflexive than substantial. When Randi claimed to have done tests himself that refuted Sheldrake's studies, he was unable to produce them and then claimed the records had been lost in a flood. Few found this credible, not least because he blamed Hurricane Wilma, which had occurred four years before his alleged tests; and that the dogs he tested had been moved to Mexico and their owner was "tragically killed last year in a dreadful accident". Randi belatedly apologised.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, perhaps stimulated by his own declining health, he turned his fire on alternative medicine, acupuncture and homeopathy. Slightly more moderate in tone, he sought to present himself as an educator and moral campaigner for truth against

falsehood. He was surprisingly temperate with his involvement in a BBC project and the journal *Nature* in a large-scale study of homeopathy in 2008, and successfully exploited social media and online forums to the full, finding a new audience. A backhanded tribute to his symbolic role came in *Randi's Prize* (2008) by journalist Robert McLuhan, which was recommended as a methodical, well-researched work pointing out there was ample proof of paranormal effects that ought to have qualified for the prize, had there ever been any serious intention to award it.

In 2010 Randi came out as gay and revealed a relationship with Jose Alvarez, with whom he had lived quietly for decades, a relationship he had kept secret for over 20 years. The following year Alvarez was arrested by federal authorities at Randi's home in Plantation, Florida, and charged with passport fraud and identity theft. It turned out he was a Venezuelan artist named Deyvi Orangel Peña Arteaga, who had been living under the stolen identity of a Puerto Rican man for many years (FT288:5). After Alvarez pleaded guilty to two charges, Randi went through a ceremony of marriage to prevent the deportation of his partner. The Alvarez-Peña exposure was an embarrassment for Randi, forming part of a portion of a biographical film *An Honest Liar* (2014) made by Justin Weinstein and Tyler Measom, chronicling his life. Randi announced his retirement in 2015 and his Foundation was reportedly closed the same year, but it announced his death in October, citing 'age related causes'.

*Randall James Hamilton Zwinge (aka James Randi), stage magician and skeptic, born Toronto 7 Aug 1928; died Plantation, Florida 20 Oct 2020, aged 82.*

**Alan Murdie**

**1** FT recognises a useful distinction between the American spelling of 'skeptical', implying a polemical materialist position, and the more generalised implication of 'sceptical' with a c.





# I don't think I'm getting out of here...

JENNY RANGLES realises she's caught in a web of weird connections to a haunted Welsh castle

Last month, I explained how my links with Gwrych Castle in Abergele (home of the relocated *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*) started with a photo of *Coronation Street* actors I took there in 1963.

In 2002, I bought a bungalow near Gwrych. The castle had long ceased being a tourist trap and was a brooding ruin that nobody had the time or money to rescue. Then, in 2010, there was a new attempt. This time the plan was not for a country hotel but a psychic retreat. Needless to say, my interest picked up. It transpired that the plans were being drawn up by someone who claimed to have taken a photo of a spooky figure in a window when surveying the property. Only later did he realise it could not be an actual young girl standing inside the castle, as the flooring was long since gone: she must have been standing in mid-air!

The location was the 'Banquet Room' and when I first saw the image I assumed it was an optical illusion; a hoax would have been hard, though not impossible, to stage. Locals were forgiving; they'd accept a publicity stunt if it helped relaunch the venue and boosted the local economy. Moreover, they knew that the ruined estate really *was* believed to be haunted since it had fallen into disuse. While called a castle and styled as one, it was only built in 1810 by wealthy Abergele land owner Lloyd Hesketh Bamford-Hesketh. The would-be purchaser of Gwrych said he'd felt a "presence" when taking the photo of the girl and a mood of "tragedy". If so, it is hardly surprising, as two events a century apart have struck this otherwise quiet location.

On 20 August 1868, a terrible train crash occurred there. The *Irish Mail* express from London to Holyhead was a service I watched pass my bedroom over a century later. On that day in 1868 it was being pulled by a steam engine named *Prince of Wales* when it was hit by runaway trucks from a freight service as it passed below the castle. The trucks were carrying paraffin oil, which exploded in the collision and created a huge inferno trapping the passengers, including members of the aristocracy known to the Bamford-Heskeths. They were unable to escape and despite brave firefighting efforts by tenant farmers from the land where my bungalow was later built, 33 people died. The richer ones were clutching jewellery melted by the inferno. Today a memorial sits below the castle.

Tragically Pat Phoenix, the *Coronation Street* actress who started off my Gwrych



story in 1963, never did appear on my radio show: she became very ill, marrying actor Tony Booth on her deathbed after she had cared for him when he nearly died. Booth, father-in-law of Prime Minister Tony Blair, had moved in with Pat after a chilling accident that involved barrels of paraffin oil that caught fire and exploded as he collided with them – just as in the Gwrych train crash.

By another extraordinary coincidence, 100 years later the Prince of Wales and that same stretch of track came together in another explosive moment. On 30 June 1969, two men carried a bomb they had constructed close by the castle, heading for the railway below. They never made it, as the bomb detonated prematurely, killing them both. Nationalists had tried to disrupt the investiture of Prince Charles at Caernarfon Castle, an event making him the Prince of Wales – the name of the doomed locomotive at Abergele a century before. Happily, the Royal train this time passed through Abergele unscathed, although other bombs went off near the castle. Remarkably, a year to the day before this, I was by chance staying in a caravan that directly overlooked Caernarfon Castle.

Many people familiar with Gwrych think they know who the ghostly presence was: Winifred, Bamford-Hesketh's granddaughter, who inherited the property after her father's death. She died just as the house I bought in 2002 was constructed on the edge of farmland. Indeed, the road leading up to the castle from there is called Dundonald Avenue, as Winifred was Countess of Dundonald. She died at Gwrych in 1924 – though some say she never left. The caretaker who then looked after the property was terrified as her 'haunted' room kept mysteriously unlocking itself overnight.

This imposing castle, with its 1,500ft-long frontage and 18 battlement towers, was the largest building constructed in the UK during the 19th century. Winifred saw its future as with the Royal Family, and bequeathed it as

LEFT: Gwrych Castle photographed in the 1920s.

their official residence in Wales. It was given to the Prince of Wales, who became King Edward VIII, but he never took possession. It was a refugee centre during WWII for hundreds of Jewish children rescued in the nick of time from Hitler's march across Europe, and a tourist spot for the next three decades, as when I visited in 1963; since Winifred died it has had no secure future.

In 2014, as I left Abergele to move back to England, the Heritage Trust donated large sums to finally start renovation of this lost gem and allow it to host events such as dog shows. (Winifred's love of dogs was such that locals say her ghost miraculously saved one who survived the leap from the high battlements unscathed.) By 2018, the tale of Winifred's ghost was enough to make it a popular 'spend the night in a haunted castle' venue. The trust confirmed that there have been many reports of 'Winifred' as a 'woman in white' wandering the grounds.

My association with Gwrych Castle ended with my move to Stockport in 2014. Or so I thought. Given the trail of coincidences related here, I should not have been so sure. Shortly after I'd settled in, some land between the two railway lines that edge my home was redeveloped as an oasis in the town and a commemorative sign erected to explain the history of the area. It reports that this land was the last remaining part of historic Bridge Hall: "The estate was owned by Loyd Hesketh Bamford-Hesketh of Gwrych Castle Abergele in North Wales." I had travelled 100 miles, from one country to another, and ended up moving from one piece of land owned by the Bamford-Hesketh family to another. Gwrych was not letting me go! After I stopped gawping at the sign I did some digging and learned I was catching my bus into town in front of a care home named after the Lord of Gwrych, whose English manor house once stood on the site of this building. Other clues were everywhere. There are roads around my house dating to the early 1900s: Winifred Road, Dundonald Street, Countess Street, Abergele Street, and, at the end of one, the Bamford Arms. It sits on Buxton Road. In 2002, I'd moved to Abergele from – where else? – the Derbyshire spa town of Buxton.

The spectre allegedly haunting Gwrych Castle, Winifred, the Countess of Dundonald, had followed me all the way from Abergele, casting a shadow through time, space and my life. I don't think I'm getting out of here!





# THE RUSKINGTON HORROR

In a new series, fearless road ghost hunter **ROB GANDY** turns his attention to the haunted highways of Lincolnshire and asks why this notoriously flat and largely agricultural English county produces such a rich crop of high strangeness. For his first investigation, he looks back at a terrifying case that was first aired on *This Morning* back in 1998.

**A**s regular readers will know, I have a particular interest in phantom hitchhikers and road ghosts. This began with a chance conversation in 1990 about a first-hand experience which I called *The Old Man of Halsall Moss*. I sought further testimonies in 2014 and received a surprisingly large response. I have continued to receive witness statements and currently I have 16 first and second-hand testimonies about this phenomenon that haunts this flat, primarily agricultural area covering coastal Sefton and inland West Lancashire [FT56:52-53; 328:32-39; 358:42-47; 370:42-45; 382:38-43]. In the initial main article [FT328:32-39] I asked whether this type of landscape somehow induces psychological reactions under certain circumstances – and, if so, then maybe there should be similar examples from the Fens in East Anglia and the Somerset Levels.

It was later that I became aware of strange experiences reported by drivers in Lincolnshire, which featured on ITV's *This Morning* daytime television programme back in 1998, then under the stewardship of husband and wife team Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan. On 5 February, Richard was accompanied by Julia Carling (standing in for Judy) and Reverend Lionel Fanthorpe of *Fortean TV* fame. This part of the programme was entitled 'Living with Ghosts', and was a phone-in where viewers were invited to talk about their personal experiences of ghosts. Calls came in from across the country, but things really took off when a man named Kevin Whelan rang in to tell of his horrifying experience while travelling home to Sleaford in Lincolnshire only two weeks before the programme. Amazed by Kevin's story, Richard immediately called for his researchers to investigate what was going on and sent a team up to Ruskington, where the incident had occurred. With typical flamboyance, Richard dubbed the phenomenon "The Ruskington Horror", which he admitted had



LEFT: Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan, the husband and wife team who presented ITV's *This Morning*.

place. In addition, I undertook my now usual practice of putting out a 'call' through local media for witnesses to get in touch with me with any related stories, hoping that there might be some more recent experiences.<sup>2</sup> In this article I concentrate on the *This Morning* broadcasts. Responses to my 'call' and witnessed events from other sources will be described in part two, next issue.

## CASES REPORTED TO THIS MORNING

It was clear that many people rang *This Morning* with their stories. Not all of these were used and obvious hoaxes were excluded. Set out below are summaries of the dozen quoted, which vary from full details to simple references.

### KEVIN WHELAN

Around 2am one Sunday morning, a couple of weeks before the programme, Kevin Whelan was driving down the A15 from Lincoln towards his home in Sleaford at about 60mph. On the horizon, just before the Ruskington turn-off, he saw something floating that looked like a large white bin-bag; he wasn't concerned, thinking it was probably just car headlights or something similar. However, when he got to where it was, a face suddenly appeared around the car's front pillar at the top-right of the windscreen. It was Greek-looking, with dark hair and olive-green skin and was holding its left hand up. It had a pitted face and Kevin could see its teeth. Below the neck was a kind of white fluorescence, as with a photographic image when the camera flash is too bright. Kevin was shocked and scared but carried on driving for (he estimated) another 40-50 seconds.<sup>3</sup> until he came to a dip in the road where whatever it was faded into obscurity down the side of the car. He then "just bombed it back home", where he ran into the house and woke his wife. He

## A FACE APPEARED: IT WAS GREEK-LOOKING, WITH DARK HAIR AND OLIVE-GREEN SKIN

a nice Victorian 'penny dreadful' touch.

Lincolnshire is famous for its notoriously flat landscape (the reason it was home to so many RAF airfields during WWII). Given my question above and the responses that *This Morning* received, I had to investigate further. It should be remembered that *This Morning* was on air every weekday and that it covered different topics in different parts of the programme, between commercial breaks. Therefore, the full details of *The Ruskington Horror* are made up from excerpts that were broadcast on different dates and in different parts of the programme. Only some of these, and related transcripts, are available on the Internet.<sup>1</sup> I therefore purchased a DVD from ITV which covered all 11 excerpts over the period 5-19 February 1998. What I report below represents summaries of what took









ABOVE: The stretch of the A15 between Lincoln and Sleaford where most of the encounters with road ghosts have taken place, photographed by Garry Ross.

looked in the mirror; his face was white and his skin was covered in goosebumps. His wife later confirmed that he was panicking and crying when he told her about what had happened. In all their time together, she had never seen him so distressed.

Kevin subsequently confirmed the exact location of the incident with a member of the ITV team as being between the right turn to Brauncewell and Leadenham and the left turn to Ruskington. (Because most witness events occur on this specific 350-yard stretch of road I henceforth refer to it simply as the 'focal site'). He didn't know how he stayed on the road. He had not been drinking and he didn't believe in ghosts. He added that later a friend of his had been told by a police officer that in the previous 18 months a motorcyclist was killed on that stretch of the A15, losing both legs in the accident.

### ROB BURKETT

Rob Burkett used to deliver day-old chickens (there are an awful lot of chicken farms in Lincolnshire). Around 8.30 one evening in October/November of (probably) 1984 he had finished a delivery and was heading back to his B&B in Ruskington on the A15. Just before the Ruskington turn-off, suddenly "this thing" seemed to walk out from the side of the road with its hand up, as if giving a warning. He was so scared that he broke the speed limit to get away.

### SARAH MARTIN

Sarah Martin saw something at the same place as Kevin Whelan in 1997 (or possibly 1996). She and her partner had been to the cinema in Lincoln and were heading down the A15 towards Cranwell, where they lived.

## A BLACK SILHOUETTE OF A MAN RAN OUT AND WENT STRAIGHT IN FRONT OF THE CAR

On the corner near the Brauncewell and Leadenham turn-off a black silhouette of a man ran out from the ditch and went straight in front of the car. Logically, they should have hit it – but there was no impact and seemingly nothing there. The figure had no face and Sarah cried out – but her partner who was driving didn't see anything. She said that "it was horrid... really frightening."

### AT THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON PUB

On 6 February, Nina Myskow broadcast from the Duke of Wellington pub in Leasingham, which is three miles from Ruskington and close to the A15. Outside the pub, she introduced Kevin Whelan and Sarah Martin, and referred to more local ghost stories about a woman in a pink ball gown and two white cart horses being seen on three occasions on the same stretch of road. She subsequently reported from inside the Duke of Wellington, where she spoke to Kevin's wife and confirmed Kevin's and Sarah's stories with them, before interviewing other witnesses present. Catherine Stephenson described how when she was 15 (in the 1980s) she was walking to school in Ruskington. She felt a cold shiver up her back, and when she turned round a

figure came out of the ditch. It was just a head and shoulders, with something like a sheet below and no arms or other limbs.

Nina then turned to Leigh, a local reporter, whose office had received many calls following the previous day's programme. Callers said they had seen strange things, so Leigh visited the local pub where she was told about people seeing black figures. Armed with a torch, her boyfriend and his dog, she then went to a place called 'Horse-shoe Hollow', a supposedly haunted locale. Walking around, they came upon a 'cold spot', and when Leigh went to walk towards some trees the dog ran in front of her. Her boyfriend said that the dog was cutting her off, because it didn't want her to go there.

Nina inferred that the dog was trying to save Leigh.

ITV researcher Michelle Bowker stated that many 'off the record' witnesses had also come forward, with several having seen things very similar to what Kevin and Sarah had reported. She said: "They were too frightened to come on, for fear of retribution." Richard Madeley made the important point that these people were probably telling the truth; they weren't likely to be making up things "to get on the telly, because they won't come on the telly."

### CHRISTINE LEE & JENNY SELLARS

On 6 February, there were also two female witnesses in the studio. Jenny Sellars told how in the late 1980s she was driving from Sleaford to Lincoln, not particularly fast. She was on a rather dark stretch of road when she saw something like a sheet or bit of plastic, which came down in front of her wind-screen. She slammed on the brakes, thinking



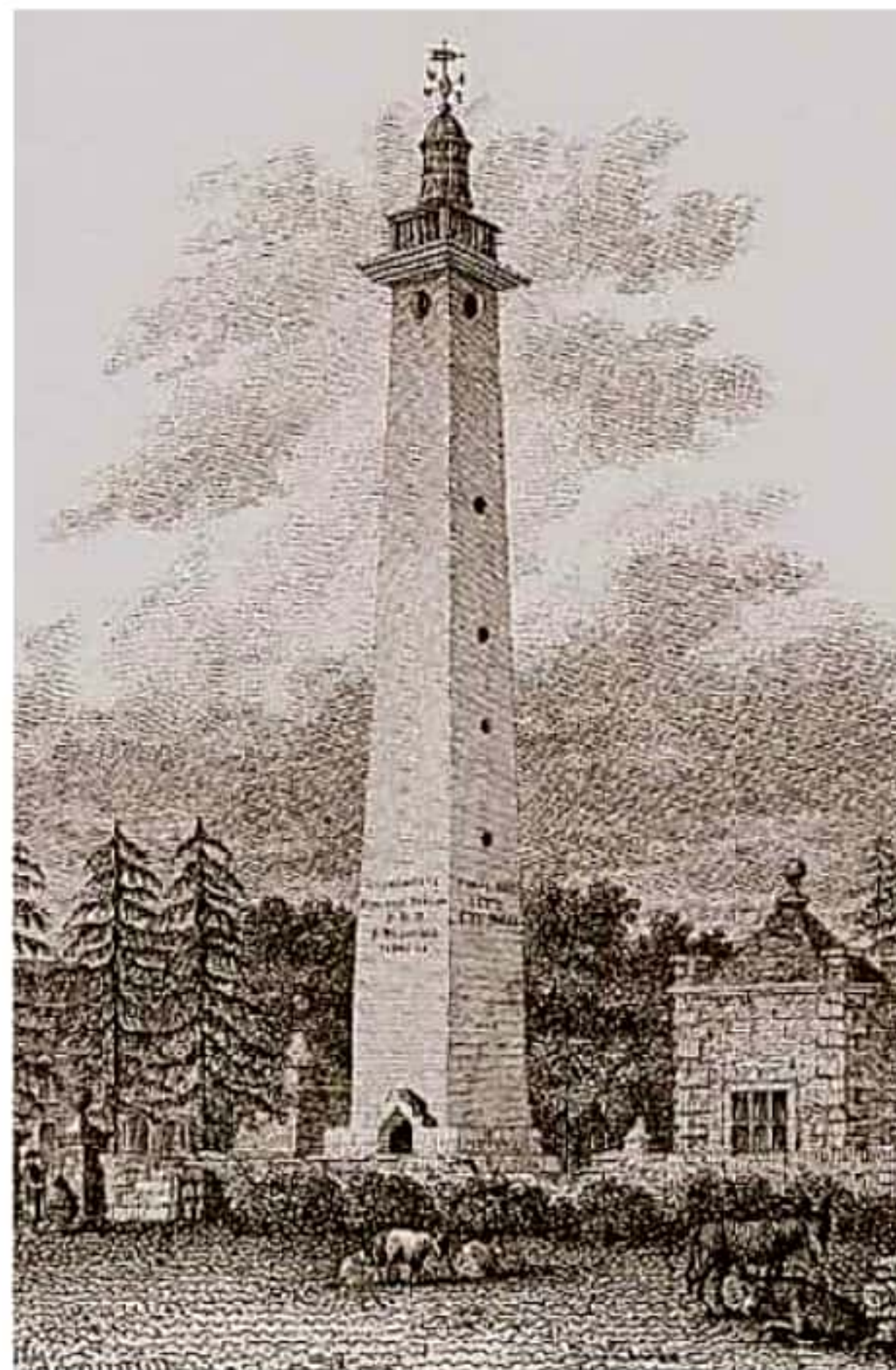
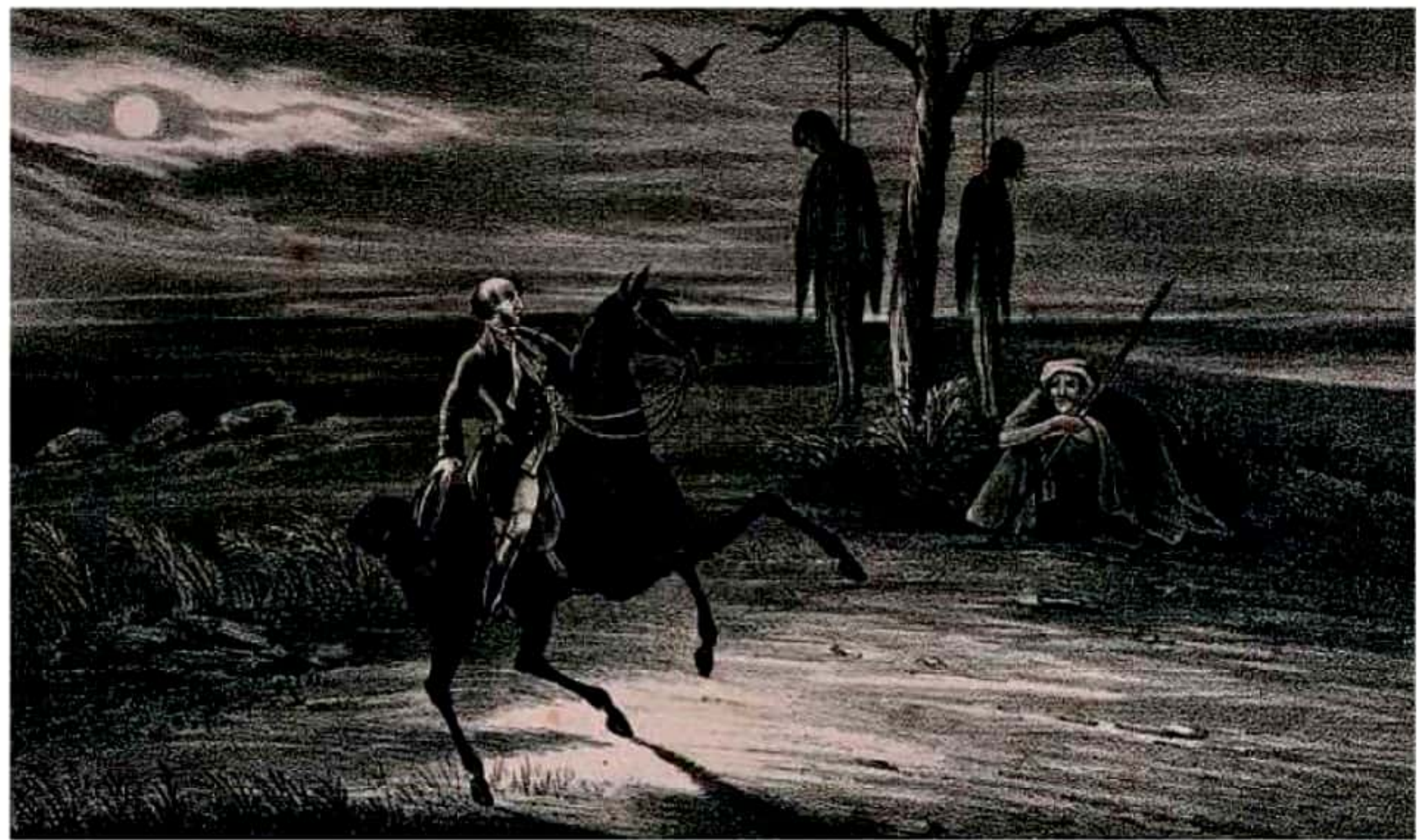
# HIGHWAYMEN HANGING AROUND?

Richard Mad-eley reported that somebody at the information library in Sleaford advised that the area where the sightings take place is known as ‘Hangman’s Haunt’. It is also called Dunsby Hollow and was the site of Dunsby mediæval village.<sup>1</sup> It is in a deep dip in the road, to the east of the A15, south of the Ruskington turn-off. On the opposite side is the large lay-by where Shirley Wallace ‘sensed’ a gibbet had once stood nearby. Apparently in the past it was very difficult for the stagecoaches to get insurance if they went down this road because odd things would happen; for example, passengers would jump off and run away. Also, highwaymen used to haunt the spot – in the hollow, they couldn’t be seen by approaching stagecoaches until they came over the horizon. Roads in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were little better than rough tracks, which limited the speed of stagecoaches, particularly travelling uphill in inclement weather.

One correspondent told me that when he lived in Sleaford in the early 1960s, a local man by the name of Fred Wilson told him about ‘Hangman’s Hollow’, giving the same location. He said that according to folklore highwaymen were hanged from a gallows there (in line with the custom of displaying their bodies close to the scene of their crimes); although the exact spot was not known, it was believed to be the highest point following the hollow (travelling toward Sleaford). However, it would seem more likely that any site for gallows or a gibbet would be near the Ruskington junction, making them highly visible, but not too close to the buildings that were there originally.

That highwaymen were abroad in Lincolnshire is evidenced by the building of Dunston Pillar, six or seven miles to the north, which according to the 1843 *Journal of the Agricultural Society* was the “only land light-house ever raised” in England.<sup>2</sup> It was commissioned by Sir Francis Dashwood (founder of the Knights of St Francis, which became the Monks of Medmenham, later called a Hellfire Club), in 1751 as a gift to his wife Sarah, who feared crossing the dark, wild heathland near her childhood home, Nocton. It originally stood 92ft (28m) high, with a large octagonal lantern on top. Its purpose was to improve safety for 18<sup>th</sup> century travellers crossing a particularly treacherous area of Lincolnshire known for its many incidents of robbery by highwaymen. The lantern was lit regularly until 1788 and was used for the last time in 1808 when it was destroyed in a storm.

It will be noted that the focal site,



TOP: *The Gibbet*, a lithograph by W Clerk, 1839. ABOVE: Dunston Pillar, then and now.

where most sightings occur, is to the north of the Ruskington junction and it might actually present a better place for highwaymen to intercept travellers, given its topology. Therefore, might it be an alternative candidate for ‘Hangman’s Hollow’? Interestingly, the lay-by from where Garry Ross took his photo of that stretch of the A15 is very similar in nature to a rough lay-by on Tom Otter’s Lane near Saxilby, north-west of Lincoln. Here, there was a gibbet on the opposite side of the road (more about this in a future article).

It would appear that the historical presence of highwaymen in the area is embedded in the local psyche. Perhaps inevitably, Dick Turpin himself was allegedly one of them. But the quoted variations in place names – ‘Hangman’

versus ‘Highwayman’ versus ‘Horseshoe’ and ‘Hollow’ versus ‘Haunt’ – suggests a lack of certainty about exactly where they operated and only serves to emphasise the folkloric nature of associated stories. Indeed, it is highly likely that highwaymen would have varied the spots where they held up stagecoaches so as to maintain the element of surprise and minimise the risk of capture. With that in mind, it is reasonable to assume that the dips in the road to the north and south of the Ruskington turn-off might *both* have been used for hold-ups at different times and by different highwaymen.

<sup>1</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1018395>

<sup>2</sup> J Charles Cox, *Lincolnshire* p.120,



# WHICH WITCH WAS WHICH?

On the 6 February edition of *This Morning*, Julia Carling said: "Somebody's called in, actually, from the *Atlas of Magical Britain*, and there's a reference about the Ruskington ghost. It says along the road, it used to be full of witches and the last witch apparently was innocent, and she became the black-figured ghost."

Now, the *Atlas of Magical Britain* is a book by Colin and Janet Bord,<sup>1</sup> so I contacted Janet for the relevant text. She told me that her local witch story involved Byard's Leap and didn't appear to relate to Julia Carling's statement. It was as follows:

*When the local people decided to rid themselves of a tiresome witch, the story goes, a shepherd was chosen to stab her. He fetched all the horses to the pond, and the first one to raise its head from drinking when he threw a stone into the water was the one he had to mount. He did so and called the witch, who got up behind him on the animal, which was named Bayard. When the shepherd stabbed her in the breast, she clutched the horse's back with her long, sharp claws and he leaped with the pain. The jump carried him 60 feet, and the witch fell off his back into the pond and drowned. In another version, a knight was riding past when the witch jumped up behind him and Bayard made three leaps, marked by three stones 30 yards apart. Today the event is marked by two sets of four horseshoes 50 yards apart.*

On 12 February, Susan Maxwell reported a legend of a Knight Templar riding his horse along the stretch of road in question when a witch stopped him, possibly demanding a toll payment to pass. The Knight refused, or his horse bumped into the witch. Either way, she cursed him and whoever subsequently passed that way, resulting in horses going lame and coaches overturning; nowadays cars stop unexpectedly or crash. The ghost holding up its hand is thought to be a warning to travellers about the dangers of the witch's curse.



On 19 February, local ghost tour guide Jill Collinge talked about 'Old Meg the Witch' who was responsible for mischief and mayhem and greatly feared by the locals. They hired a knight to get rid of her, and he set off on his trusty steed, Byard, which happened to be blind. When the knight met Old Meg he smote her breast with his sword, but she jumped on to Byard's back and dug in her nails. This caused Byard to leap high into the sky, and in the struggle between them, the knight not only pierced the witch's heart but also killed the horse. Four horseshoes can be found at Byard's Leap, where the event took place.

*Lincolnshire Life*<sup>2</sup> gives another version in which Meg was originally a fair young

maid who fell in love with a man who deserted her to join the Crusades. She became involved with a dark stranger (i.e. the Devil) who gave her powers as a witch. Turning malevolent and hateful, Meg caused storms, plagues to destroy cattle, and deformities in children. Locals were desperate for relief from her reign of terror when... guess who turned up? Yes, her old sweetheart, now a successful knight. He challenged Meg to a fight to the death and rode to meet her on blind Byard. He struck her a glancing blow and she jumped on Byard's back, digging in her claws. Byard leapt 60ft (18m) before crashing to the ground, dislodging the witch. The knight then dispatched her with his sword.

Historically, there have been alleged cases of witchcraft in Lincolnshire and neighbouring counties, and witches were the subject of fear and folklore.<sup>3</sup> It is arguably inevitable that some link

to witchcraft would attach to the Ruskington Horror phenomenon, and it seems evident there is an old local legend at play here that has morphed into several variations, as folklore does. However, the location of Byard's Leap is well established: there is a hamlet by this name on Ancaster Heath at the junction of Ermine Street and the A17. But this is roughly five miles (8km) on the other side of RAF Cranwell from where Kevin Whelan had his experience. So, whether there is a separate story specific to the Ruskington Horror location which has been conflated with the Byard's Leap legend, or whether the Byard's Leap legend has somehow been attached to the Ruskington Horror location, is open to debate.

<sup>1</sup> Janet and Colin Bord, *Atlas of Magical Britain*, Bracken Books, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> [www.lincolnshirelife.co.uk/posts/view/the-legend-of-byards-leap](http://www.lincolnshirelife.co.uk/posts/view/the-legend-of-byards-leap).

<sup>3</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witches\\_of\\_Belvoir](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witches_of_Belvoir) and <https://theconversation.com/the-witch-the-facts-behind-the-folktales-56233>.





**ABOVE LEFT:** The tower of Temple Bruer Preceptory, once attached to a 13th century Knights Templar church. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The psychic investigator and dowser brought in by *This Morning* to investigate found the tower to be full of lost souls, negative energy and a vortex that acted as a doorway to other dimensions.

she had hit something, but she knew she hadn't because there was no impact or anything on the screen. She stopped the car, and whatever it was then went around the side of the window. She opened the car door, but didn't get out. There was nothing on the ground.

Christine Lee described her father's experience, evidently some years before, when he worked at the RAF station at Cranwell. He and four friends decided one night to cut across the fields on their return to barracks when "this white ghostly figure came from up high [and] put his hand out as if to say 'don't go'". Christine's father and one friend grabbed their companions and led them the long way back to the barracks. They were all really frightened. She added that he had believed the fields may have been marshy or boggy, and that the figure's gesture warned them of the danger. At a later date, he saw the figure again while driving, and therefore turned off to avoid going further up the A15.

Julia Carling followed by highlighting more calls to *This Morning* with similar stories, picking out a couple: Lynn Gothing from Essex had seen the same thing one and a half years ago (in 1997): it looked like a monk waving. Helen Carter saw the same thing holding up a hand as if in warning (she did not date the encounter). There had also been a call from a man who used to drive children on school trips around that area in the 1960s. One sunny afternoon, passing the Ruskington turn-off, he was convinced a figure in dark clothing had rushed out of the ditch and under the wheels of his coach. He was sure he had killed someone, but no trace

of any person or impact could be found. He then went to the Ruskington pub for a drink to settle his nerves. (Presumably there were no kids on the coach at the time.)

### RICHARD MADELEY 2012

On the run-up to Hallowe'en in 2012, Richard Madeley and his wife Judy Finnigan referred to the events in an article for the *Daily Express*.<sup>4</sup> Richard highlighted the "avalanche" of viewers ringing ITV following Kevin Whelan's call and the fact that, setting aside the obvious hoax calls, an impressive body of anecdotal evidence swiftly built up from credible witnesses. In the article he quoted a couple of stories that didn't appear in the programmes. One concerned a local man who, when a small boy, was being driven from Sleaford to Lincoln. He vividly recalled his father's sudden shout of fear and panic as "someone jumped out in front of our car". Except that they hadn't. The story passed into family legend. The second experience involved a milk delivery tanker driver who was certain he'd crushed someone under his wheels early one winter's morning: "I thought it was a suicide." What this article serves to illustrate is that *This Morning* received many more testimonies than appeared on the programme, suggesting that there are real and ongoing phenomena involved.

### POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Unsurprisingly, people telephoned *This Morning* with their theories about what might be the cause of the phenomena, some quoting actual incidents and others folklore.

A number were referenced several times in the programmes. In summary, they included claims of ghosts relating to: Knights Templar; local witches (see panel); highwaymen who were hanged and/or gibbeted in 'Hangman's Hollow' (see panel); a local plague pit where the bodies of Lincoln's dead were once brought to be buried; crashed WWII airmen; a hermit who lived in a ramshackle dwelling in the adjacent field and was run over in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; and the motorcyclist mentioned by Kevin Whelan.

### THIS MORNING INVESTIGATES

Given the nationwide interest and number of stories received, *This Morning* sent researchers to Lincolnshire to find out more.<sup>5</sup> On 12 February Susan Maxwell and her colleague 'Tom' told how they had visited Temple Bruer Preceptory,<sup>6</sup> a Grade I listed 13<sup>th</sup> century tower, one of a pair once attached to the chancel of the Knights Templar church. It had been the second wealthiest Templar preceptory in England, after London. Richard had said that this was "a few hundred yards away" from the 'focal site', but it is nearer two and a half miles. Susan described how she was originally sceptical but found herself being 'spooked' when visiting the tower: images came into her head, "out of nowhere", of a WWII RAF couple. She also referred to a Templar being cursed by a witch (see panel) and the nearby village that had been wiped out by plague and then razed to the ground, with its foundations now just bumps in the ground (the mediæval village of Dunsby).<sup>7</sup> The belief that the 'ghost' was warning people with its





**ABOVE LEFT:** The reputedly haunted control tower at RAF Coleby Grange, one of many former airfields that still act as reminders of Lincolnshire's role in World War II. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Part of the old runway at RAF Metheringham, another WWII station with a ghost story attached – the 'Metheringham Lass'.

raised hand was highlighted. Susan added that Shirley Wallace, a psychic researcher/medium from *Fortean TV*, and a dowser were to join in the investigation. Shirley was already on the case, doing a little remote viewing and examining maps and archives. She suspected that a real energy force was involved and that there was residual trauma from the wartime RAF airfields.

The following week (18 February) 'Tom' provided an update and referred to the area on the A15 as being the "most haunted place in England" and that local "ley lines" might be involved. On 19 February Jill Collinge, the local ghost tour guide, took team members to 'The Grange', a derelict airfield control tower, which is claimed to be very haunted, with reports of pebbles being thrown by an unseen hand and people experiencing icy chills. She also talked about the RAF-related ghost of the 'Metheringham Lass',<sup>8</sup> 'Hangman's Hollow' (see panel) and Byard's Leap (see panel). Shirley Wallace and dowser Julian McKennaker<sup>9</sup> visited Temple Bruer and suggested that it was a place where positive and negative "ley lines" crossed, creating an energy spot. The beams in the wooden cross in the ceiling were said to be in alignment with the 'ley lines'. Shirley said that she had seen in advance that the tower had a Knight Hospitaller as its "guardian", and stated that there was a "vortex" present, which was a doorway into other dimensions. The team found a band of "negative energy" within the tower and Shirley and Julian advised that there were 19 "earthbound occupants" (viz. spirits/souls/thought forms/soul fragments) present. Shirley said that they "had missed their connections" to the afterlife, and added that the Knight Hospitaller had

been waiting for the team to arrive. She then undertook a blessing ritual to cleanse the tower. This enabled all 19 people to be released, with negativity of the 'ley line' disappearing and the temperature increasing.

The team were next shown at the large lay-by on the A15 by 'Hangman's Hollow'/Dunsby Hollow, south of the Ruskington turn-off. Shirley became very emotional and said that there was great trauma, which she described as "Death! Death! Death!" and said they were 20 yards from where a gibbet had once stood. She picked up on supernatural smells, and explained that various things in the immediate area served to create confusion in travellers and drivers, particularly late at night and if they were tired. The team then walked the nearby fields where Shirley sensed the young man killed when his red Honda motorbike crashed and caused severe injuries to his legs (inferred as the motorcyclist referred to by Kevin Whelan (above)). Shirley then undertook another ritual blessing to clear the area.

The programme concluded with Susan, 'Tom' and Shirley talking to Richard Madeley back in the studio. Shirley described how she had released the spirit of the young motorcyclist who was traumatised by the loss of his legs; she managed to get him to focus on her and demanded that he "rush" towards her, which he did, and then he departed through her. She was asked who "Kevin's ghost" might be, to which she replied that she couldn't be sure who it was; perhaps "another one". Richard enquired if the phenomena would cease now the area had been "cleansed". Shirley said that they should, and she was prepared to put her "head on the chopping block" and say the

area was now "clear". Richard concluded: "It's over!"

But as will be seen next month, this was not necessarily the case...

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A transcript from the related programmes for 5 and 6 Feb 1998 is available at: [www.roadghosts.com/RuskingtonTranscript.htm](http://www.roadghosts.com/RuskingtonTranscript.htm).

<sup>2</sup> [www.lincolnshirelive.co.uk/news/local-news/haunted-stretch-lincolnshire-road-left-3455381](http://www.lincolnshirelive.co.uk/news/local-news/haunted-stretch-lincolnshire-road-left-3455381).

<sup>3</sup> Kevin posted on the Fortean Forums on 11 May 2015, responding to some of the "rubbish" that had been written on the site about his experience. He confirmed that he was not a drinker, had never taken any illegal drugs in any form, and was completely awake on the night in question. However, he accepted that the incident would have taken a lot less time than he stated originally; but he was absolutely petrified when it happened.

<sup>4</sup> Richard and Judy, "An encounter with a ghost of the road", 20 Oct 2012: [www.express.co.uk/comment/columnists/richard-and-judy/353168/An-encounter-with-a-ghost-of-the-road](http://www.express.co.uk/comment/columnists/richard-and-judy/353168/An-encounter-with-a-ghost-of-the-road). In answer to my question, Richard advised that the programme received "several dozen" calls with only a few from obvious eccentrics.

<sup>5</sup> The dates quoted are the dates items were broadcast rather than when the team were 'in the field' filming. The broadcasts are presented in date order.

<sup>6</sup> [www.heritagelincshshire.org/sites/temple-bruer-knights-templar-preceptory-tower](http://www.heritagelincshshire.org/sites/temple-bruer-knights-templar-preceptory-tower).

<sup>7</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1018395>.

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metheringham\\_Lass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metheringham_Lass).

<sup>9</sup> I am not 100 per cent certain of Julian's surname and spelling given that the audio on the DVD is not very clear.

➡ **ROB GANDY** is a Visiting Professor at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University and a regular contributor to FT. A lifelong fortan he has eclectic interests in all things weird, including phantom hitchhikers, ghosts, strange sports and folk customs, time slips and synchronicities.





# TRAD

## STORIES

ELECTRICITY PYLONS,  
STATES OF PANIC  
AND FEAR, ORBITING  
CAPSULES, MODONS,  
BASS GUITARS,  
HYDRO-ELECTRIC  
POWER STATIONS,  
IRREPRESSIBLE URGES,  
PLANE CRASHES,  
TUNNELS, TOURISTS,  
TANKS, ACCIDENTAL  
DEATHS, MYSTERIOUS  
LIGHTS, PINBALL  
MACHINES:

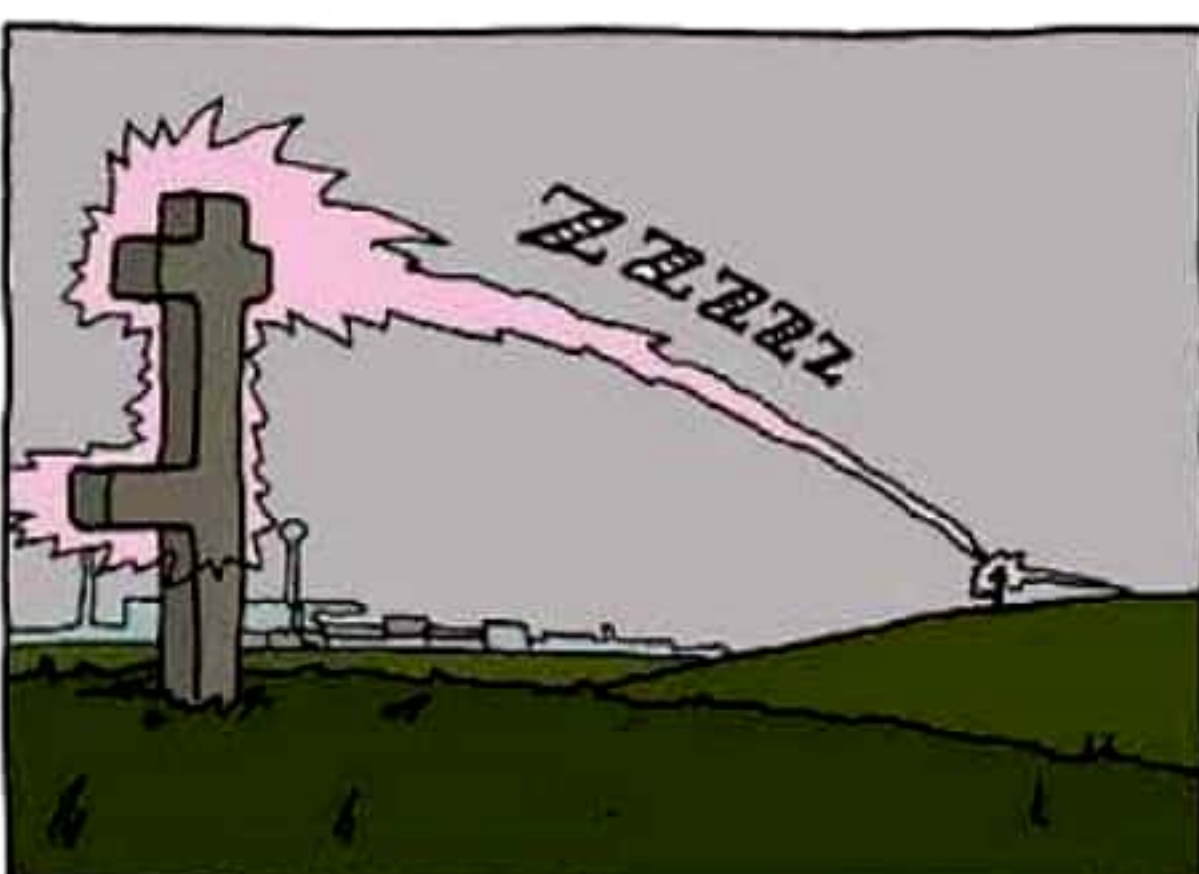
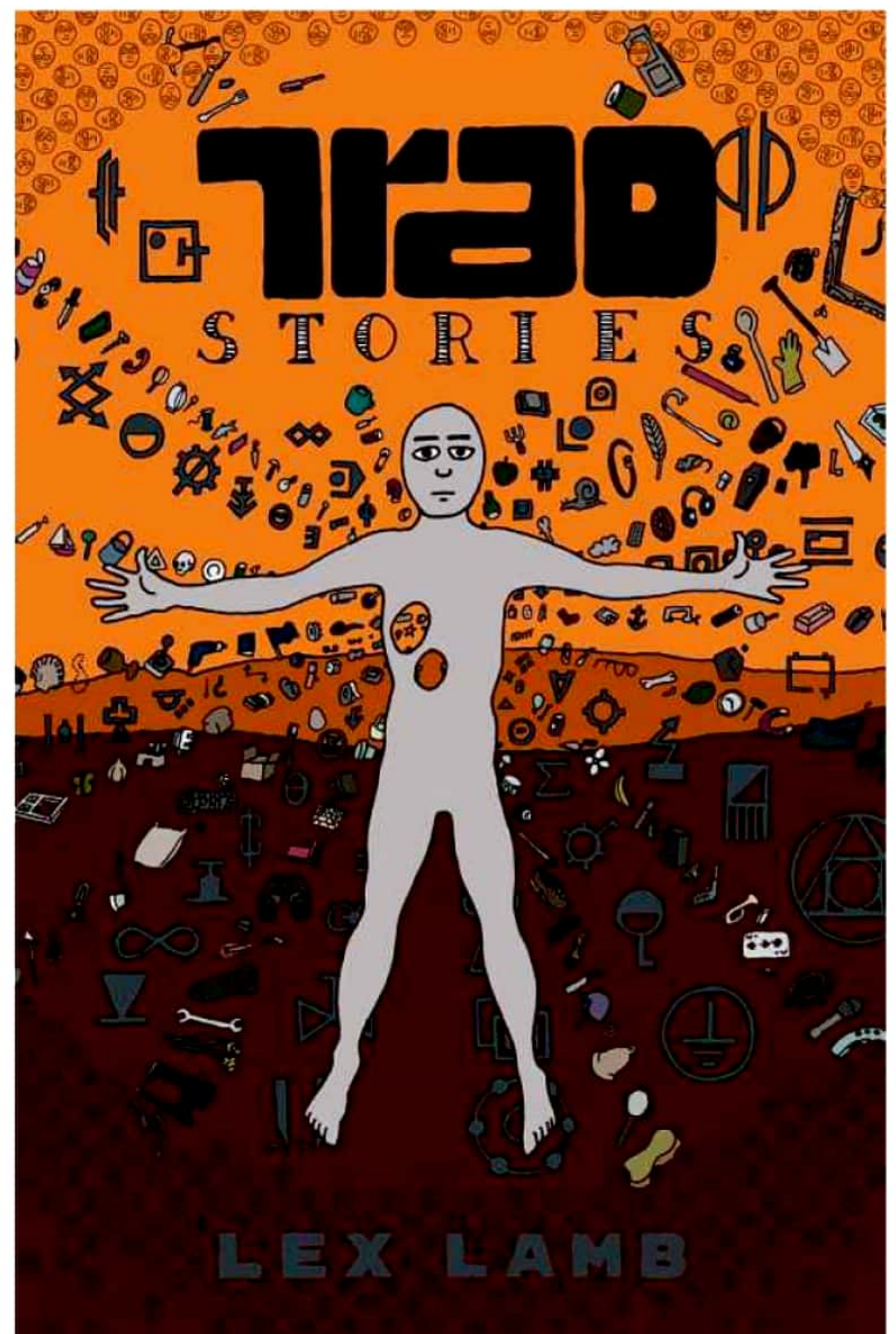
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# THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

As a new exhibition of mediumistic art tours the UK, **ROBERT WEINBERG** explores how the impact of Spiritualism in Britain inspired pioneering female artists to explore hidden worlds and forge a new language of abstraction.

**O**n 20 July 1861, a 47-year-old London spinster received a visit from her cousins that would forever trans-

form her life and work. Georgiana Houghton had trained as an artist but had given it up 10 years earlier when her beloved sister Zilla died in childbirth at the age of 26. That loss, and the earlier death of a 13-year-old brother, Cecil, had led Georgiana to search out comfort – as so many prematurely bereaved Victorians were doing – in spirit mediumship. No amount of table-tipping, however, could have prepared Georgiana for what her cousins introduced to her on that day.

They told her about artwork, purportedly prompted by souls beyond the grave, created by Elizabeth Wilkinson, the wife of William M Wilkinson, editor of *The Spiritualist Magazine* and of the first published book about spirit drawings. Georgiana learned that Mrs Wilkinson's works had been "executed through her hand by her son in spirit life, a lad of about 13." Reaching for her planchette – the flat piece of wood with two wheeled casters and a pencil-holding aperture, used to assist in automatic writing – Georgiana tried firstly to call upon Zilla, and then Cecil, to inspire a drawing. Cecil, she reported, was not able to help, but communicated that he would go and fetch an artist who could.

Shortly afterwards a spirit called Angelo, better known (curiously) as Henry Lenny – who had been a speech- and hearing-impaired artist when alive – turned up and set to work. "Two sheets of paper were then covered with all sorts of curves," reported Georgiana, "and it was marvellous to me how such intricacies could be produced with so awkward an instrument as the planchette." Lenny returned again the next night



LEFT: Georgiana Houghton. FACING PAGE: Georgiana Houghton, *The Spiritual Crown of Annie Mary Howitt Watts*, 1867.

## A MISSIONARY FOR SPIRITUALISM

As time went on, Lenny insisted that Georgiana draw without the planchette, scolding her for using "only a machine." She retorted that it was he who had guided her hand and she could always discard the planchette whenever she wanted. "So he admitted his error, and promised never to call me a machine again," wrote Georgiana.

The experience of Georgiana Houghton was similar to that of many other Victorian spirit medium artists, who reported feeling an extraordinary electrical energy in their arms, which would then move with far greater speed than was normal. She began to make art using "a method completely different from any I had ever seen, producing a transparency of effect that is quite marvellous, the petals being seen through one another, while at the same time possessing a richness and brilliancy which filled me with more delight as each drawing was done; for in this new power I had found my life's work, and went on untiringly from day to day, and week to week."

Houghton produced intensely coloured, densely layered patterns that have little relationship to the narrative realism of her Victorian contemporaries – "works of art," she described them, "without parallel in this world." What is perhaps most surprising to our contemporary eyes about Georgiana's works is their radical, non-figurative originality that pre-dated Wassily Kandinsky's first forays into abstraction by decades. In her own time, a reviewer in the *News of the World*, no less, described Georgiana's work as having "the imagination of a canvas of Turner's, over which troops of fairies have been meandering, dropping jewels as they went."

It is unlikely that Georgiana nor any of

**"EVERY SPIRIT HAS THEIR FLOWER AND FRUIT," WROTE HENRY LENNY**

and Houghton produced "another sheet of curious curves, and then, at my request, a flower." The following evening, Lenny prompted the drawing of a fruit, after which he wrote: "It is Ceciliana; fruit of your brother's flower; every spirit has their flower and fruit..."







her contemporaries would ever have used the term abstraction; her early works clearly contain recognisable botanical forms, flowers and fruits that symbolically represent departed people. Visitors to the Hayward Gallery's current touring exhibition, *Not Without My Ghosts: The Artist as Medium* can only marvel at Georgiana's other-worldly *The Spiritual Crown of Annie Mary Howitt Watts* (1867), a melange of undulating amoeba-like shapes and sub-aquatic plants.

In time, the spirits of Georgiana's close family members and Henry Lenny made way for "righteous men of both the Old and New Testaments", including Joseph the carpenter and Christ's disciple John, along with several Renaissance artists including Titian and Correggio, and higher angelic beings, all of whom seemed to want another chance at shaping human culture. The reverse sides of around half of Georgiana's works are covered in automatic writing by the spirits, introducing themselves and describing and interpreting their own drawings. Georgiana's subjects – and their relationship to any recognisable form, living or dead – evolved into a "sacred symbolism" in which different colours represented divine figures or virtues. Again, significantly predating Kandinsky's 1912 treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and Mondrian's Theosophy-inspired aspirations towards

purity, Houghton (or one of her illustrious guides) chose her palette to convey specific meanings, or the thoughts, words and deeds of particular people.

"The way to persuade somebody that you really were in touch with another world was to create art that was nothing like anything being seen at that moment," says Vivienne Roberts, curator at London's College of Psychic Studies. "If it was always kept in the realm of flowers, which you see a lot of in this type of artwork, it would not have been as influential. Georgiana Houghton was a kind of missionary for Spiritualism. She wanted to change people's minds. So the more otherworldly the art looked, the more convincing it would be."

### GLORIOUS FRUITIONS

Equally otherworldly, although more recognisably figurative, was the spirit art of Anna

Mary Howitt (1824-1884). She had trained at Henry Sass's Art School, alongside Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt, and had exhibited at the Royal Academy, but being a woman precluded her from studying at the Academy itself. Her career and self-confidence suffered a further setback after her painting of Boadicea came in for severe private censure from the singularly influential critic John Ruskin. Anna Mary had given everything to become an important, well-respected painter; now her hopes were dashed.

A broken engagement and the loss of her brother Claude awakened her to Spiritualism, enthusiastically practised by her parents. As she found solace in spirit drawing, her works evolved to resemble illuminated manuscripts. These were critically lauded as "some of the most delicate beautiful drawings ever done by a woman's hand" or faintly praised as "wonderful scribble-scrabbles". William Michael Rossetti was less impressed. "If only the spirits had let her alone," he wrote, "she would have drawn and painted very much better than she ever did under their inspiration."

The 19th century educationalist and social activist Barbara Bodichon (1827-1891), who described herself as "one of the cracked people of the world," also counted Howitt as one of "the cracked". Bodichon

## A MELANGE OF UNDULATING AMOEBA-LIKE SHAPES AND SUB- AQUATIC PLANTS



COURTESY OF THE COLLEGE OF PSYCHIC STUDIES, LONDON

ABOVE LEFT: A spirit drawing by Anna Mary Howitt, c. 1858. ABOVE RIGHT: *The Flower of Catherine Stringer*, 1866, by Georgiana Houghton.





COURTESY OF THE COLLEGE OF PSYCHIC STUDIES, LONDON

ABOVE: *The Monogram of John Ingram*, 1870, by Georgiana Houghton. BELOW: The catalogue for the 1871 London exhibition of Houghton's spirit drawings.

launched the *English Women's Journal* in 1858 and established the "Ladies of Langham Place", where her friends – including Anna Mary – gathered to discuss women's rights, going on to promote the Married Women's Property Act of 1870. The fact that women came into their own with spirit art and were also active in emerging campaigns for universal suffrage is indicative of the changing religious and social reality for their sex. The traditional bibliocentric explanation of the world was being challenged by Darwinists, materialists and atheists, while the Church was internally racked by arguments between reformers and the old guard.

Barred from the accepted institutions of power yet eager to express their spirituality and make their voices heard, women mediums could claim access to an alternative, higher source of authority. At a time of high infant mortality, grieving mothers could find reassurance that, as one psychic researcher put it, "what is sad and unfinished on the earthly plane has a glorious fruition on the Spiritual plane." And in the masculine art world, claiming the direct intervention of great male artists in their works might give women's art more credibility and place female artists on an equal footing with men.

Nor was there any perceived contradiction between mediumship and scientific



discovery. "To be interested in Spiritualism and Theosophy, you had to be interested in science," says Vivienne Roberts, "they went hand in hand. It was an exciting time. Not only was Spiritualism the space where women could bring religious belief and science together, séances could offer the proof that they needed."

## EXHIBITING THE OTHERWORLDLY

For Georgiana Houghton, above and beyond the drawings' method of creation, the artistic quality was paramount. While spirits were undoubtedly at liberty to select anybody through which they could convey their messages, she believed, it was logical that they should choose a well-trained artist when such communications needed to take on a visual form. Georgiana built up a coterie of devotees across London, establishing weekly sessions at her home for artists who felt they had lost their impetus. After a few sessions with Georgiana, Henry Collen (1797-1879), a former miniature painter for Queen Victoria, was moved to produce "rather elaborate spiral lines." In 1863, another of Georgiana's protégées, Barbara Honynwood (1825-1895), who also initially created conventional floral images, was moved to project hectic cosmic energy and wonder into drawings that resemble the patterns created in modern-day plasma globes. Half a century before Kandinsky rejected references to conventional representation, Honynwood produced works like *Album Page XIV*, the most surprising work in the Hayward Gallery touring exhibition, with its tangle of sinuous, white lines winding between autumnal coloured organic forms.

For four months in 1871, Houghton realised a long-held ambition of having a



# "PURE PSYCHIC AUTOMATISM": SURREALISM AND SPIRIT ART



**ABOVE LEFT:** *The Torment of Tantalus*, a 1938 watercolour by British Surrealist and psychology researcher Grace Pailthorpe. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Ithell Colquhoun's occult leanings fell foul of Breton's definition of Surrealism. **BELOW:** Madame Fondrillon's *Dessin médianimique*, March 1909.

When the French poet André Breton launched the *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, he defined the new movement as: "Pure psychic automatism... the dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all moral or æsthetic concerns." It was in Breton's home that the first Surrealist experiments with automatism took place, his writer friends René Crevel and Robert Desnos being particularly adept at summoning words, as Breton put it, "from the mouth of shadows."

Inspired by Freud, Surrealists believed that through speaking, writing or drawing rapidly they were expressing not a spiritual reality but the workings of the unconscious. Yet there are many visual similarities between Surrealist automatism and spirit drawings. Attracted to Spiritualist art, Breton even published an exuberant abstract work by the mysterious French medium Madame Fondrillon in the fourth issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* in July 1925.

"Breton was definitely going through the Spiritualist periodicals," says Vivienne Roberts, curator at London's College of Psychic Studies. "He used a lot of images from the *Annals of Psychic Science*, *The Occult Review*, and probably *Light*."

Despite an interest in magic and alchemy, Breton seems to have been drawn more to the formal appearance of mediumistic art as a language for visualising the psyche, uncontaminated by

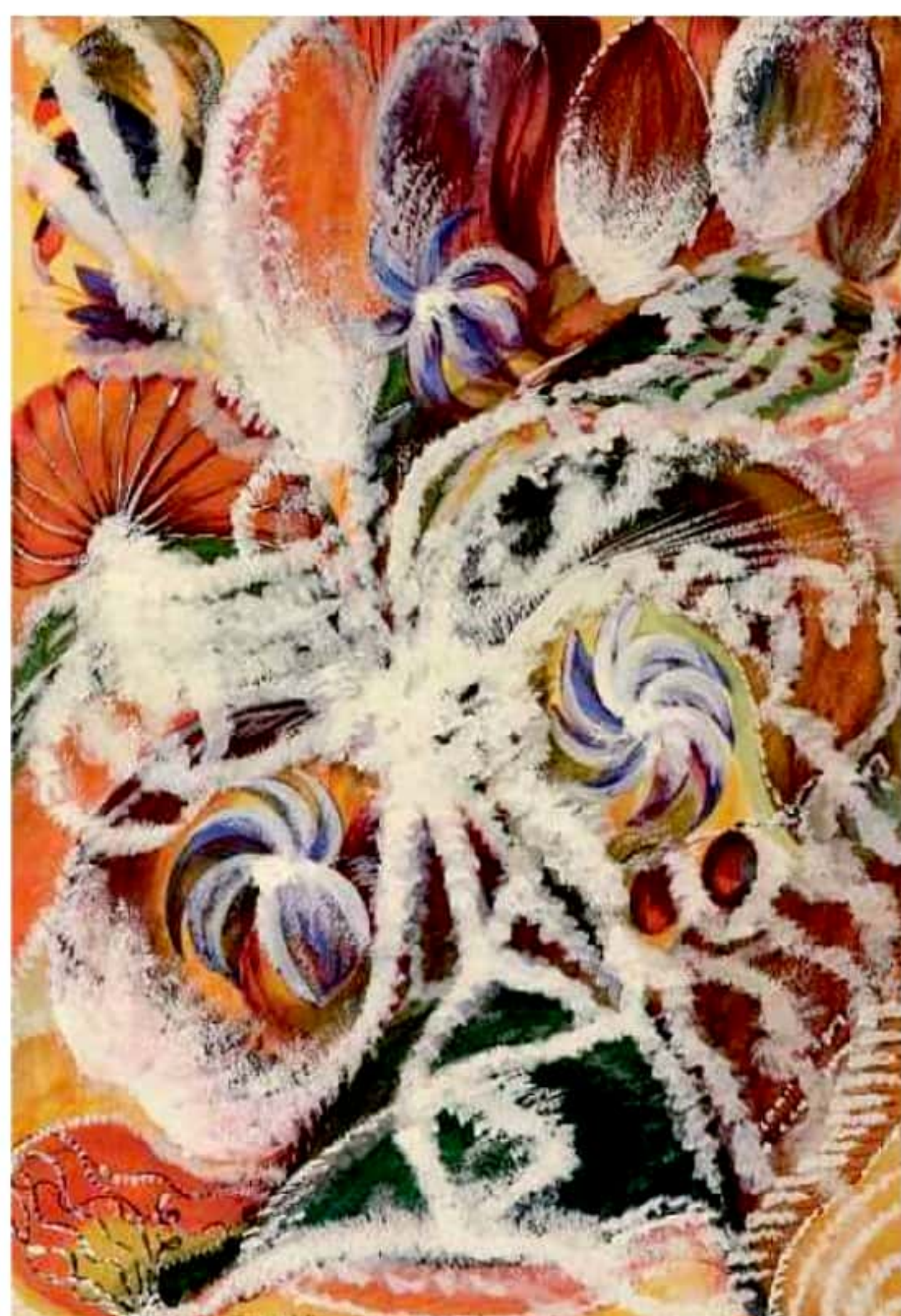
"the barren religiosity", as he described it, of Spiritualism. "But Surrealists had to work hard to get to that point, whereas the mediums just knocked it out in an effortless state," says Roberts. Breton would later state that the dead could not communicate with the living, defining Surrealism rationally as the product of the unconscious mind.

In contrast, other Surrealists such as Leonora Carrington embraced the occult. She performed acts of divination – often a Tarot reading – before making impor-

tant decisions. But there was little tolerance of artists who were formally committed to magical practices. Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) was a devotee of Crowley's Thelema and a member of GRS Mead's Quest Society. Trained in astral travel and the invocation of spirits and angels, she believed her Celtic ancestry endowed her with the kind of second sight that would make her art more successful, but she was forced out of the British Surrealist Group when she refused to renounce her occult associations.







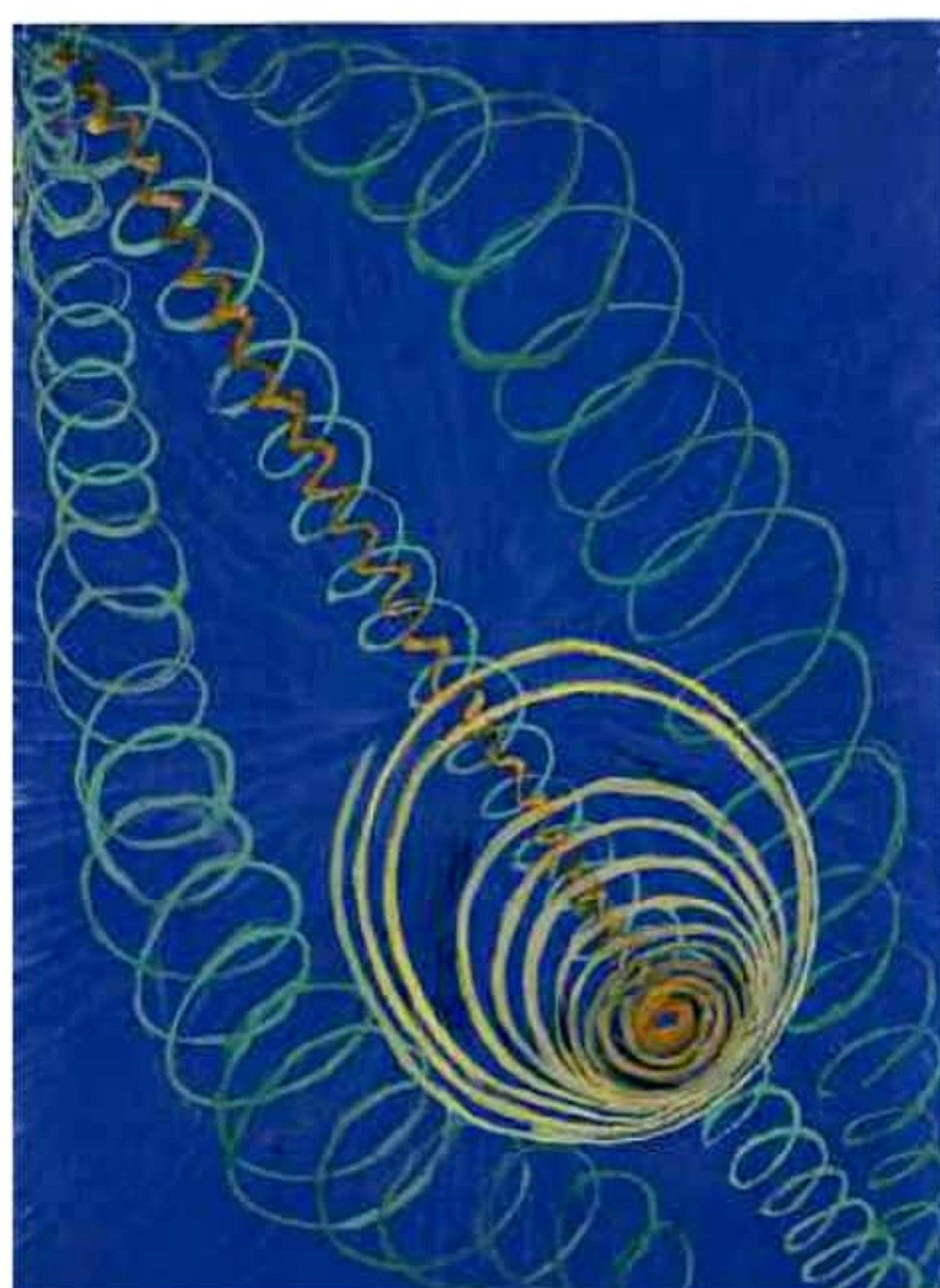
WESTWOOD / PAUL POPPER / POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

**ABOVE LEFT:** Barbara Honeywood, *Album Page XIV*, c. 1860s. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A one-metre-wide section of an artwork in pen and ink on calico by Madge Gill, at her home in East Ham, London, 1947. **BELOW:** Hilma af Klint, *Primordial Chaos*, No. 16, 1906-07.

major exhibition of her spirit drawings. She exhibited all of the works still in her possession as well as others borrowed back from their owners – 155 in total – at the New British Gallery at 39 Old Bond Street, surveying a full decade of her prolific output. The critics did not know where to place it, the society periodical *Queen* reporting: “The watercolour drawings... are so extraordinary in character, and are so entirely opposed to one’s ideas of art, ancient or modern, that criticism in the ordinary manner becomes difficult, not to say impossible.” Although Houghton only sold one of her works, and nearly bankrupted herself in the process of putting on the show, she was able to give herself credibility as a woman artist worth exhibiting in her own right.

### FROM MEDIUMS TO MODERNISM

The perceived spiritual inspiration and creation of art during séances and trances continues into our own century, as the exhibition brings together works spanning 150 years by more than 30 artists from around the world. These range from a small selection of “visionary heads” of mythical and historical figures that appeared to William Blake during séances, through a spontaneous, lacy doodle by *Les Misérables* author Victor Hugo (who frequented séances on Guernsey), to the hallucinatory outpourings of Madge Gill (1882-1961). Gill claimed she was working under the control of an ancient Babylonian high-priest, Myrinerest, who first appeared to her after her son died in the 1918 influenza pandemic. These images perhaps owe less to the promptings of spirit and more to the Victorian woman’s preoccupation with home decorating inspired by



English vegetation and the ‘secret language of flowers’ – codes which, once understood, could transcend the stifling repression of passions. To the Spiritualist artist, though, such patterns were intended for a future, more-elevated humanity that would comprehend more readily their meaning. To a modern eye, they can sometimes fall somewhere between a Liberty print and a ‘mindfulness’ colouring book.

A number of contemporary artists continue to draw upon the power of the unseen world to explore the radical ambiguities of visible life around us. “Any kind of unrest revives the popularity of spiritual art,” says Vivienne Roberts. “You see spikes at times of threat, war or illness. With the pandemic, political unrest, the climate debate, we feel

helpless a lot of the time and people want to feel that there is something more. In such times, people will inherently create.”

From the earliest works produced by *Homo sapiens*, depicting gods and mythological creatures, to the transcendent video installations of Bill Viola, art inspired by the spiritual dimension of human existence refuses to go away. A retrospective of paintings by the Swedish mystic Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) which opened at New York’s Guggenheim in 2018 reportedly attracted the museum’s highest ever attendance. What the radical abstractions of Georgiana Houghton and Barbara Honeywood in particular demonstrate is that the conventional European, male-dominated narrative of modern art as a succession of revolutionary, often atheistic and nihilistic movements that concerned themselves only with the formal aspects of pictorial representation, is woefully inadequate and misleading. Perhaps, after all, it was the intervention of Henry Lenny and his cohort of departed associates, working through the pencils of grieving Victorian women intent on making their mark on society, which set art on its modernist path.

***Not Without My Ghosts: The Artist As Medium*** is touring to the Millennium Gallery, Museums Sheffield, until 7 March 2021; Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea, 20 March–June 13 2021; and the Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, dates to be confirmed.

♦ ROBERT WEINBERG worked for 30 years as a radio producer and now writes about art for the *Daily Telegraph*, *Apollo*, theartstory.org and the *British Art Journal*.

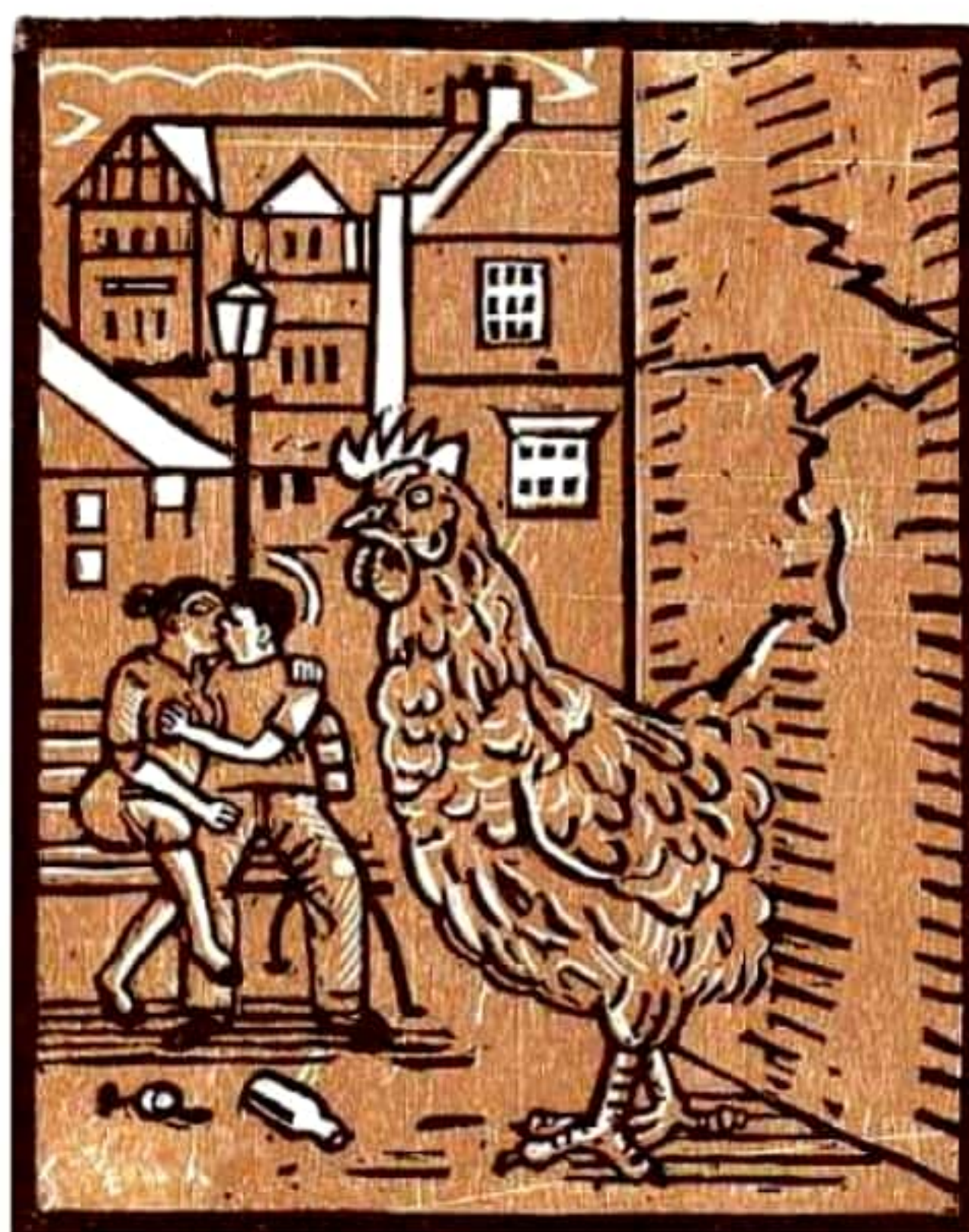


# THE FROZEN CHICKEN GHOST

Pond Square in Highgate, London, is said to be haunted by the flapping phantom of the world's first frozen chicken. **JEFFREY VALLANCE** recounts how Sir Francis Bacon's early experiment in refrigeration found modern echoes in his own explorations of poultry spirituality.

In 1978 artist Jeffrey Vallance bought a frozen fryer chicken at the Ralph's Supermarket in Canoga Park, California. He later buried the hen at the Los Angeles Pet Cemetery after a brief memorial service. He also installed a grave marker for the frozen bird, naming her Blinky the Friendly Hen. This seriocomic artwork took the concept and processes of documentation to their most absurd conclusion and offered a striking commentary on our society, the treatment of animals, spirituality and death. The year 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of Vallance's Blinky project and in celebration of this historic event, California State University Northridge Art Galleries held an exhibition in 2019 featuring a Blinky Chapel, Reliquary Chamber, Theatre and Poultry Gift Shop. In 2020, Edward Cella Art & Architecture gallery also mounted a Blinky show including an extensive relic installation and portable souvenir cart. While Jeffrey was engaged in researching poultry spirituality, he came across the tale of Sir Francis Bacon's frozen chicken ghost presented here.

In early April 1626, during an unseasonably bitter cold spell, 65-year-old Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was riding through the snow in Pond Square (in Highgate, London) in a horse-drawn sleigh. He was musing on alternative methods of preserving meat – and perhaps because it was so cold – BANG: it hit him – born was the concept of meat refrigeration. As Bacon was the Father of the Scientific Method (or the Baconian Method), he decided to test his theory right



## THE CHICKEN GHOST CUSTOMARILY APPEARS DURING COLD WEATHER

there and then. Several farms were close by in Highgate, where chickens could easily be bought. Straightaway one was slaughtered, gutted and plucked on the spot. Bacon stuffed the carcass with snow and crammed more snow and ice around it: creating the world's first frozen chicken! Through

the frigid air, Bacon was heard excitedly shouting: "I think I have found the answer to putrefaction!"

Sir Francis Bacon's experiment in meat refrigeration was an astounding success, forging the way for a massive poultry industry that slaughters billions of hens each year. However, by a weirdly sardonic turn of fate, Bacon caught a severe chill as a result of his exposure to the snow, which quickly turned to pneumonia. As a result, he died on 9 April 1626 at the Earl of Arundel's mansion in Highgate. The frozen chicken had cost him his life. Thereafter Pond Square has been haunted, not by the ghost of Bacon but by that of the frozen chicken.

*Against cold meats was he insured?  
For frozen chickens he procured  
brought on the illness he endured,  
and never was this Bacon cured.*  
– Poem by Pip Wilson

Many people have reported seeing a pallid plucked chicken running around in circles, shivering and pathetically flapping its wings or roosting on the lower branches of a tree in Pond Square. When anyone approaches, it always vanishes into thin air. Passers-by have also reported hearing phantom clucking and disturbing squawking sounds. Reportedly, the hen apparition has been seen running straight through a solid brick wall. The frozen chicken ghost customarily appears during extremely cold weather. During World War II, Air Raid Wardens often saw the phantom frozen chicken. One of them even tried to capture it for dinner, but it seemed



ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: The beginning and the end of Blinky the Friendly Hen – from a Canoga Park supermarket to the Los Angeles Pet Cemetery.





**ABOVE LEFT:** Bacon on the walls: note the suspended chicken in the canvas at right. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A frozen chicken simulacrum (or ghost baby) in a Queensland swimming hole. **BELOW:** A portrait of Sir Francis Bacon.

to evaporate when he got near it. More than once, the ghost hen has put the chill on couples romantically embracing under a tree – by dropping suddenly from a branch above and plopping down hard next to them.

More recently, a local family was enjoying a swim in the Highgate Bathing Pond. A friend snapped a photograph – only later, when they looked at the photo, they saw a plucked chicken swimming next to them! Forewarning: here I must confess, on this last account of the swimming chicken ghost I fudged a bit – or rather when I was researching Highgate Bathing Pond, I confusedly misinterpreted a photo of a family swimming in Murphy's Hole in Queensland with the phantom chicken. The family interprets the phantom image as the ghost of a drowned baby. In spite of this, I think the apparition actually looks more like a swimming dressed whole chicken.

There is even a tasty dish called “Bacon Wrapped Chicken” created in honour of the incident. Recipe directions: Preheat the oven to 500 degrees. Prepare the chicken by seasoning the outside with salt and pepper. Cram the cavity with thyme sprigs and lemon wedges. Turn the chicken so the yawning cavity is facing you. Put one end of a bacon slice squarely over the left thigh, run it over the breast meat and finish by covering the right thigh. Repeat with more strips of bacon, slightly overlapping, until all of the meat is covered. Roast for 90 minutes then remove the chicken from the oven and allow it to rest peacefully for 15 minutes before carving. The bacon will form a hard, shell-like shroud over the meat.

By the way, artist Francis Bacon (1909–1992) is distantly related to Sir Francis Bacon. He is celebrated for his luscious meat paintings such as *Figure with Meat*, (1954), a version of Diego Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X – with the addition of two sides of beef hanging on either side of his head. Velázquez's ruddy-faced portrait of Pope Innocent X shows his holiness dressed in a bacon-coloured cape worn over a feathery white liturgical vestment. Incarnadine curtains hang behind the pontiff with the appearance of sagging loose flesh. Bacon's



pope, framed by two bloody carcasses, looks like a depraved butcher, with his slaughtered animal victims hanging behind him. Bacon's painting is famously featured in Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman*, in a scene where the Joker gleefully destroys several works of art in Gotham City's art museum. However, when the Joker comes upon Bacon's macabre painting, he spares it saying, “I kind of like this one.”

Concerning his meat paintings, Bacon stated: “Flesh and meat are life! If I paint red meat as I paint bodies it is just because I find it very beautiful. I don't think anyone has ever really understood that. Ham, pigs, tongues, sides, of beef seen in the butcher's window, all that death, I find it very beautiful.” Bacon also painted a series of plucked chickens such as *Chicken* (1982) and the strangely unfinished painting of a nude, titled *Figure* – looking very much like a plump raw chicken. As he was a descendant of Sir Francis Bacon, one could surmise that he'd heard the story of the death of dear Sir Francis and the frozen chicken. Was this possibly an inspiration for his chicken paintings? Unquestionably his paintings of meat have an eerie otherworldly quality.

I was attracted to this story of the frozen

chicken ghost, seeing as on 27 April 1978 as a performance art piece, I buried a frozen chicken at the Los Angeles Pet Cemetery with the full funeral service including a casket, viewing room and grave marker. [FT53:23]. And giving credit where credit is due: I have Sir Francis Bacon to thank for the invention of meat refrigeration: the method that produced the aforementioned frozen chicken named Blinky! It seems the ghost of the frozen chicken of Highgate hasn't been seen since the 1970s. I wildly conjecture that perhaps inadvertently some kind of weird sympathetic magick took place by the ritual of burying a frozen chicken with full ceremony 352 years after Bacon's first frozen chicken experiment. Perhaps somehow this ritual placated the wondering spirit of the Frozen Chicken Ghost of Pond Square – by at last honouring a slaughtered hen with a proper Christian Burial. Sir Francis Bacon's refrigerated chicken was the first of its kind and forerunner of vast industrial poultry production, whereas Blinky was the first hen to be singled out from that same system to be laid to rest honourably and peacefully in hallowed burial ground, equivalent to a Tomb of the Unknown Chicken.

“Dedicated to the billions of hens sacrificed each year for our consumption.”

#### SOURCES

*Brief Lives*, “Francis Bacon: Viscount St. Albans,” by John Aubrey (1626–1697); “London's Ghosts: The Shivering Chicken of Highgate,” by Leslie Thomas, *The Evening News*, London, 10 Dec 1957, p6. Reprinted in *The Age* (Melbourne), 27 April 1960; [www.haunted-london.com/pond-square-ghost.html](http://www.haunted-london.com/pond-square-ghost.html); [www.real-british-ghosts.com/highgate-chicken-ghost.html](http://www.real-british-ghosts.com/highgate-chicken-ghost.html); <https://hauntedpalaceblog.wordpress.com/2013/04/25/the-strange-case-of-sir-francis-bacon-and-the-frozen-chicken/>; [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2988212/Woman-claims-mysterious-ghost-baby-photobombed-family-portrait.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2988212/Woman-claims-mysterious-ghost-baby-photobombed-family-portrait.html)

◆ **JEFFREY VALLANCE** is an artist, writer, curator, explorer and paranormal experimenter. He has published over 10 books, including *Blinky the Friendly Hen*, *Relics and Reliquaries* and *The Vallance Bible*. His new anthology, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, will be released later this year.





## 'STAN BY YOUR STRONGMAN

In the first of two epic journeys, **SD TUCKER** travels down the Silk Road towards the modern-day satrapies of Central Asia, where the cult of the strongman seems set to last forever – just so long as the strongmen in question manage to drink enough yoghurt...

Central Asia, the land of the 'Stans, is obscure to most outsiders, with the entire expanse merging into one giant Generikhstan, a backwards, post-Communist 'Borat Country' of scant importance to the wider world. This cartoon image is not wholly fair, however. In reality, this vast, arid, yet resource-rich region occupies an increasingly crucial space between rival major nations like China, Russia, Iran and India, with its huge oil and natural gas reserves poised to play an ever-larger role in geopolitics over coming decades, hopefully bringing wealth to some currently very impoverished people. Yet the area's proximity to those rogue 'Stans, Afghanistan and Pakistan, provides obvious potential for disaster should energy prices continue their recent fall and Taliban-style Islamic fundamentalism ever take root there, while Vladimir Putin's clear territorial designs to restore the old USSR's sphere of influence in the region provide further cause for caution. The Great Game of Kipling's *Kim* continues to be played in the 'Stans, and the most commonly chosen way of keeping a lid on things is to have pitiless strongmen in charge, whose repressive ways do win some genuine support among populations resigned or realistic enough to realise autocracy is at least preferable to anarchy. While often appearing absurd to Western eyes, these Little Emperors seek to make themselves seem indispensable to their own subjects ('citizens' really isn't the right word) by concentrating all State power in private hands and creating extreme personality cults which do not hesitate to depict them as being almost akin to gods on Earth.<sup>1</sup>

### TAJIKISTAN: THE SUN OF GOD

Consider Tajikistan, led since independence from the USSR in 1992 by President Emomali Rahmon – or 'President Emomali Rahmon, Founder of Peace and National Unity – Leader of the Nation', as he now officially has to be referred to every single time he is mentioned. A Sunni Muslim himself, Rahmon would prefer it if his people worshipped him, not Allah, and has placed numerous strict restrictions upon the faithful, banning beards, Arabic-sounding names, and the attendance of women and children at mosques. Instead of the Koran, Rahmon wants subjects to read his own



LEFT: Tajikistan's President Emomali Rakhmonov looms over a police checkpoint on a road in Tajikistan, 2002.

times", "the Shadow of God" and "the rising sun of Tajiks' happiness" in poems and songs like Interior Minister Ramazon Rahimzoda's *You Are Worthy*, so beloved is Rahmon that, to mark 25 years of unimpeachable rule in 2017, one newspaper renamed itself *The Blessings of the Leader*.<sup>2</sup> Life without the local godman in Tajikistan has now become literally unimaginable for most. The problem is that one day even deities like Rahmon have to die – and, once revealed as having been mere mortals after all, will it be a case of *après moi, la deluge*? Given their collective motto is *l'état c'est moi*, succession-planning is an ever-present problem for the ageing Strongmen of the 'Stans; a number of solutions have been advanced of late, some more plausible than others.

### KAZAKHSTAN: LONG LIVE THE GLORIOUS LEADER!

The ideal potential solution to the conundrum is to ensure your Dear Leader can never pass away in the first place, which means devising some special means for him to become immortal or at least live to a ripe old age. This is the chosen strategy in Kazakhstan, where Nursultan Nazarbayev served as President between 1990 and 2019, before 'stepping down' to allow a hand-picked successor to take the reins in public as he retreated into the shadows to rule from behind the scenes and eat yoghurt. Kazakhstan is the world's ninth-largest country and possesses massive oil and gas reserves, which Nazarbayev cannily exploited to strike lucrative deals with multinational energy giants, thus allowing him to indulge his many whims – such as creating an entirely new capital, Astana, from scratch, and toying with renaming the country 'Kazak-Eli' or 'Kazakh Nation', thinking the 'Stan suffix held negative connotations abroad. Other petro-dollars have been pumped into science. In 2010, Nazarbayev reached the age of 70, and his thoughts began turning towards death – namely, how he didn't want it to ever happen to him. Nazarbayev is not insane enough to think he is *literally* immortal, but delay is life, as Lord Salisbury said, and every extra year that can be squeezed from a

## LIFE WITHOUT THE LOCAL GOD-MAN HAS BECOME UNTHINKABLE

books, whose passages must be recited on all radio stations by actors with "good reading voices", providing comfort for those with eyesight too poor to study such tomes directly. Pregnant women reading his 464-page *Wise Thoughts and Sayings of the President of Tajikistan, Founder of Peace and National Unity* ensure his thoughts shall be passed on to babies "through a mother's milk". Hailed as "the King of Kings of our



bottle is precious to him. That same year, the President announced that a new scientific research establishment in Astana (since renamed Nur-Sultan, in the Immortal Leader's honour) was to be called Nazarbayev University (you can see a pattern emerging here), and that its focus was to be on "rejuvenation of the [human] organism" – the organism in question being himself.

"As for the medicine of the future, people of my age are really hoping all of this will happen as soon as possible," he told students at the institution's official opening. Earlier, he had urged parliament to "offer me an elixir of youth and energy" that would enable him to go on ruling "until 2020", which he has anyway, by all accounts. "Anti-ageing medicine, natural rejuvenation, immortality," Nazarbayev once mused. "That's what people are studying nowadays." They certainly are in Kazakhstan, where in 2012 the University announced its first tentative step towards creating an elixir of youth – a Yakult-style probiotic liquid-yoghurt drink called 'Nar', or 'Nourishment'. Like Yakult, Nar alone will not lend you eternal youth, but the novel "symbiotic bioproduct" would "improve digestion and the absorption of nutrients" into the body, so at least it was a start. "It's just one of the factors" needed to make a man Methuselah, one scientist admitted, so in 2017 Nar was improved with "probiotic micro-organisms" to become 'H P Wellness Elixir', an "innovative food product" launched by Nazarbayev personally. Lauding Kazakhstan's immortality research institutes as "our analogue of the Silicon Valley", the President's words were backed up by PR revealing that "daily intake will relieve adults of many age-associated intestinal diseases." In March 2020, the University revealed the next pillar of their extreme longevity plan – drinking horse milk, which could potentially reduce the risk of cancer, regulate blood-pressure and even treat TB. More easily digested than cow milk, it could be given to babies to promote a lifetime of wellbeing. As Nazarbayev himself still carries the official title *Yelbasy*, or 'Leader of the Nation', even though he is now past 80, he must have been imbibing gallons of the stuff.<sup>3</sup>

## UZBEKISTAN: NOT WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE

In 2016, Islam Karimov, who had led Uzbekistan with a rod of iron since 1989, ably demonstrated the potential for chaos when a 'Stan strongman breathes his last by lazily dying on the job from a brain haemorrhage, aged 78. Foolishly, he had not been drinking enough Nar. Karimov had put some thought into succession-planning, however; it was thought that his daughter Gulnara was poised to take over one day, but in 2013 they had a major falling-out over



a wide-ranging financial scandal. Karimov knew how to deal with most opponents – he had them shot or boiled alive in hot water, although this latter form of execution was curiously always recorded on death-certificates as being due to "an accident with a kettle". "I am prepared to rip off the heads of 200 people [personally] ... in order to save peace and calm in the republic," Karimov once boasted, but Gulnara's own head proved too difficult to remove, perhaps for sentimental reasons. Long-indulged, the glamorous Gulnara had her finger in many pies; her Twitter account billed her as a "poet, mezzo soprano, designer and exotic Uzbekistan beauty". A Harvard-educated UN diplomat, screenwriter, businesswoman, fashion designer (whose spring 2012 collection was pulled from NY Fashion Week after it emerged her nation's cotton had been picked by child slave-labour) and pop star

under the name 'Googoosha', this spoiled 40-something infant performed duets with Julio Iglesias and Gerard Depardieu, with her single *Round Run* being played in "more than 100" nightclubs in the US. Uzbekistan is not as oil or gas-rich as Kazakhstan, though, so Gulnara's whims were not quite as sustainable as those of President Nazarbayev, leading to her being labelled as a "robber baron" who had single-handedly created her own personal budget deficit in the nation's finances. Googoosha's family appear to have complained to her father about this, with Gulnara going online to accuse her mother and sister of frequenting sorcerers, or even of being witches themselves. In 2013, as her businesses folded, she recklessly began criticising her father's carelessness with kettles, comparing him to Stalin. Gulnara was then quickly sent to the gulag of long-term house-arrest, where in November 2016 it was widely reported she had died from poisoning. The rumour turned out to be untrue, but uncertainty as to her fate was widespread at the time.<sup>4</sup>

Here Gulnara took after her father, who, earlier that August, had also occupied an ambiguous position of life and death simultaneously. In his final moments, Karimov really was like Stalin with, as one headline said, "doctors just too scared to tell Uzbek despot that he's dead". For several days following his hospitalisation with a haemorrhage, the Uzbek public were left in confusion about Karimov's status, with TV showing special soothing features about fruit and vegetables to keep worry at bay. Turkey's friendly PM was first to let Schrödinger's Cat out of the bag by announcing the tragic news that Karimov had died during a live domestic broadcast of a Cabinet meeting. Forced into action, the Uzbek government now quickly proclaimed that "With enormous sorrow in our heart, we inform you of the death of our Dear President." Official nervousness stemmed not from the



ABOVE: Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 2007. TOP: Gulnara glams it up at a concert in Tashkent.





# STRANGE STATESMEN #43

prospect that witches might seize power, but that Islamists would do so. With Uzbekistan adjoining Afghanistan, Taliban militants could exploit the looming power vacuum to foster cross-border *ji*had, it was feared. The chosen solution was to make the most of Karimov's death by recasting him as a *post mortem* Muslim saint himself, thereby hopefully diverting the pious away from violence. Karimov is now buried in his hometown of Samarkand, along with Tamerlane the Great, but not in any old coffin. Known in his youth as a notorious watermelon-thief, in death Karimov had miraculously reformed into the holy father of a proudly independent nation which, he often complained, had been exploited as a virtual colony during Russian rule. Known as 'the land of a thousand shrines' (at least to PR men), around nine million Uzbeks go on pilgrimage to such sites per year, seeking blessings or miracle cures. Many are sacred not only to Muslims, but Christians and Jews, such as the biblical Prophet Daniel's tomb. Being 18m (59ft) long, it is said to grow a little every year – as does the list of new holy sites being tapped for tourist-revenue. Local Islam, influenced by Sufism, is flexible and syncretic, giving authorities ample leeway to slide Karimov's corpse into this pre-existing tradition and instil reverence for his successors in government.

The Soviets used to store fertiliser in some Uzbek shrines, but Karimov reversed such blasphemies, thus posing as a defender of the faith – even though he actually suppressed many elements of Islam, to prevent it turning radical. Sufism was officially redefined as 'domestic' Islam, while other strains became 'foreign' imports. Many Muslims disagreed and were jailed, but in 2018 Rahmon's replacements very kindly announced an amnesty. 2,700 prisoners were freed, including former religious refuseniks who agreed to repent and bow down before the new god... Islam Karimov. As a condition of release, former terrorists had to agree to be bussed out to Karimov's mausoleum and do penance. As the shrine itself says: "THIS IS A SACRED AND ETERNAL PLACE WHERE THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN, THE GREAT STATESMAN AND POLITICIAN, THE RESPECTABLE AND HONOURABLE SON OF THE UZBEK PEOPLE, ISLAM KARIMOV, RESTS." The lavish tomb of onyx and marble gives equal billing on its walls to quotes from Karimov (not the ones about ripping people's heads off) and words from the Koran, thus equating the two. With thousands of chanted prayer-vigils taking place there each year, it is intended to become a place of mass pilgrimage, and the plan seems to be working. After all, bus-loads of haggard-looking people keep turning up there and weeping in distress every day.<sup>5</sup> It would appear that rumours



co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-26082740;



TOP: Vladimir Putin and Uzbek Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev pay their respects at Islam Karimov's grave in Samarkand in 2016. ABOVE: Gulnara Karimova attends Uzbekistan's National Dress Festival in 2013.

of a 'Stan strongman's death are always greatly exaggerated. *Next Month: The terrible twins of Turkmenistan and their many vital contributions towards world literature.*

## NOTES

**1** [www.ft.com/content/1938344c-ed87-11-e4-987e-00144feab7de](http://www.ft.com/content/1938344c-ed87-11-e4-987e-00144feab7de).

**2** *Times*, 26 April 2017; [www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-42082189](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-42082189); [www.rferl.org/a/tajikstan-publishes-book-wit-wisdom-president-rahmon/28613536.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/tajikstan-publishes-book-wit-wisdom-president-rahmon/28613536.html); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emomali\\_Rahmon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emomali_Rahmon).

**3** *Times*, 20 Mar 2019, 17 Mar 2020; [www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/07/kazakhstan-president-scientists-research-ageing](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/07/kazakhstan-president-scientists-research-ageing); [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/kazakhstan/9657853/Elixir-of-life-invented-in-yogurt-form.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/kazakhstan/9657853/Elixir-of-life-invented-in-yogurt-form.html); [www.rferl.org/a/nazarbaev-university-discovers-the-elixir-of-life/24758856.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/nazarbaev-university-discovers-the-elixir-of-life/24758856.html); <http://en.nuris.nu.edu.kz/>; [www.inform.kz/en/nursultan-nazarbayev-launches-production-of-health-elixir\\_a3093853](http://www.inform.kz/en/nursultan-nazarbayev-launches-production-of-health-elixir_a3093853); [www.bbc](http://www.bbc).

[www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/19/nazarbayev-kazakhstan-jonathen-aitken](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/19/nazarbayev-kazakhstan-jonathen-aitken). Bizarrely, Nazarbayev's biography was written for him by former Tory MP Jonathan Aitken.

**4** [www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25742130](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-25742130); [www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2013/1106/King-Lear-on-the-Silk-Road-In-Uzbekistan-a-daughter-s-antics-challenge-her-dictator-father](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2013/1106/King-Lear-on-the-Silk-Road-In-Uzbekistan-a-daughter-s-antics-challenge-her-dictator-father); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulnara\\_Karimova](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulnara_Karimova).

**5** *Times*, 31 Aug 2016, 3 Sept 2016, 25 Feb 2019; [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-37260375](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-37260375); [www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-pilgrimage-dictators-grave/28955195.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-pilgrimage-dictators-grave/28955195.html); [http://uzsm.uz/en/press\\_center/uzb\\_news/the-mausoleum-of-islam-karimov-was-opened-in-the-city-of-samarkand/](http://uzsm.uz/en/press_center/uzb_news/the-mausoleum-of-islam-karimov-was-opened-in-the-city-of-samarkand/); <https://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=3758&mode=snews>; [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44685414](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44685414); <http://rsaa.org.uk/blog/2015/01/15/sufism-and-the-state-shrines-in-central-asia/>.

For an earlier entry on chess-loving Central Asian strongman and alien abductee Kirsan Ilyumzhinov of Kalmykia, see **FT331:50-52**.



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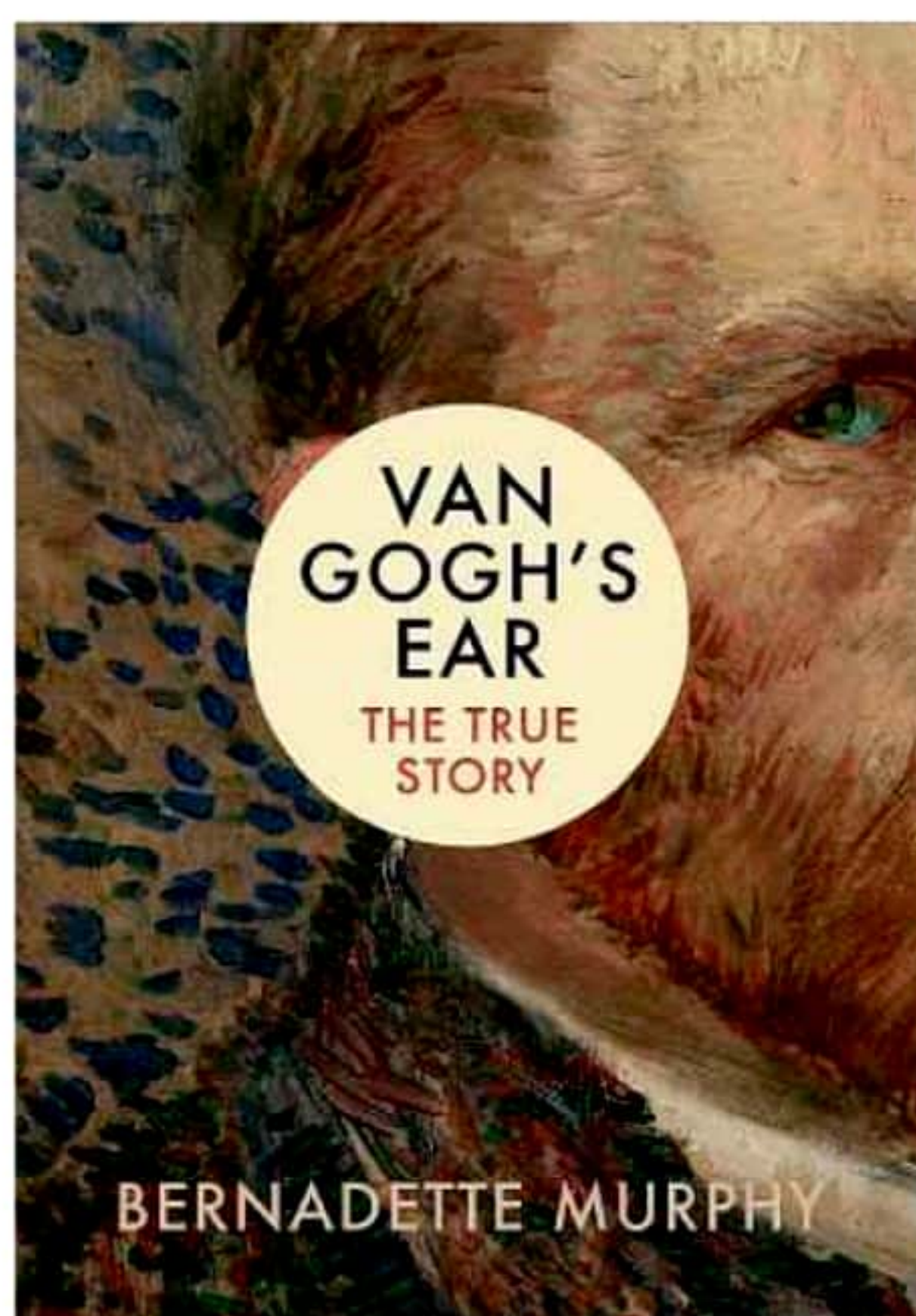
THE HIEROPHANT'S APPRENTICE PRESENTS

# BUILDING A FORTEAN LIBRARY

## NO 57. A CHINESE WHISPER AND AN URBAN LEGEND

The first time we heard the story of Vincent van Gogh (1853–90) and his famous ear, it was the clean version from our lovely primary school art teacher Mrs Unwin. He was a bit touched, but passionate about his girlfriend, and sliced off his ear as an eccentric token of his esteem. Over the years the tale became a bit raunchier: the ‘girlfriend’ was a lady of the night (*fille de joie* or *femme soumise*) named Rachel, and there was some argument over whether Vincent had cut off all or part of his ear. Almost all of this, it turns out, isn’t true, although there’s no doubt that in December 1888 Van Gogh handed at least some of his ear to Rachel, and that she fainted when she unwrapped the carefully washed and packaged organ. Bernadette Murphy spent who-knows-how-many years unearthing the actual facts about the episode – and burying a fair few other myths about the painter along the way – and in giving the results of her tireless research to us reveals, too, a fascinating picture of life in 19th-century Provence. Prepare to be surprised.

There’s no doubt either, incidentally, about Van Gogh’s ‘madness’. He was fully aware of his own mental fragility, which for years erupted intermittently amid long periods of lucidity. Exactly what his affliction was is not easy to say, since all forms of acute mental illness at the time tended to be labelled ‘epilepsy’. At his most delusional he would attempt to eat coal or tubes of paint, or drink turpentine – none renowned for their nutritional value – and at one point was convinced someone was trying to poison him. Nor is it possible to say for sure – not that anything much in psychiatry is ‘for sure’ – if his eccentric extremes of behaviour and outlook when otherwise normal were a by-product of his deeper illness, or a quirk of character, or some manifestation of the mental troubles that seem to have run in his family. Among these extremities were his divesting himself of all his possessions and insisting on sleeping on bare boards while training for the Protestant priesthood (an early enthusiasm); Vincent was not deemed suitable for ordination, rather like those would-be soldiers turned down because they’re too aggressive for a disciplined army. What’s apparent here is his over-identification with his chosen role and those who caught his interest. Bernadette Murphy acutely observes that Vincent was hypersensitive to other people; that all his breakdowns were associated in some way with women; and that when he set out to help someone in need, he was more or less overtly setting out to *save* them. All this is pertinent when it comes to disentangling why he presented Rachel with his severed ear.



‘Rachel’ seemed an unlikely name for a working girl, even as a working name (which most such girls used), being almost exclusively a Jewish name. There were fewer than a hundred Jews in Arles at the time, and Murphy soon eliminated any possible candidates. After much scouring of the records and one piece of great good luck, Murphy established that Rachel was more often known

as ‘Gaby’ (Gabrielle), and that her surname was Berlatier. She was too young to be employed as *une femme soumise* – minimum age for that was 21 (the sex trade was legal and highly regulated in France until 1946). But, it seems, she was employed at the *Maison de tolérance No 1* as a cleaner and chambermaid, and at other business establishments in the red-light district. Possibly it was to create a distance between her respectable self and the area in which she worked, that she maintained the pseudonym ‘Rachel’, but Murphy doesn’t examine the question. The red-light district was just a few minutes’ walk from Vincent’s home at the Yellow House, and he was in the habit of going there, when he could afford it, for what he quaintly euphemised as a ‘hygienic visit’.

Van Gogh *may* have first come across Gabrielle in Paris, when both were visiting in January 1888. Gabrielle was there to have a potential rabies infection treated at the Institut Pasteur. She had been attacked and bitten by a dog in Arles (the dog was indeed rabid, and was soon shot by a local shepherd). Gabrielle’s wounds were cauterised with a red-hot iron; after a course of injections she was considered safe to go home, but she was left with a highly visible scar. And the family was left with a hefty medical bill: it was to help defray this that she began working in the red-light district, albeit most respectably. It seems most likely that Van Gogh, a regular habitué, made her acquaintance there. He could not avoid seeing her scar. Murphy puts it thus: “Van Gogh had a great capacity for kindness... he would have been touched by the meek girl he saw working so hard, with such meagre reward. He would have been moved by her damaged arm. She was exactly the sort of woman he was attracted to – a wounded angel he thought he could save.”

*With a severed ear?* one may enquire in

astonishment. His friend Paul Gauguin, staying with him at the Yellow House at the time, reported that Vincent was in the midst of one of his

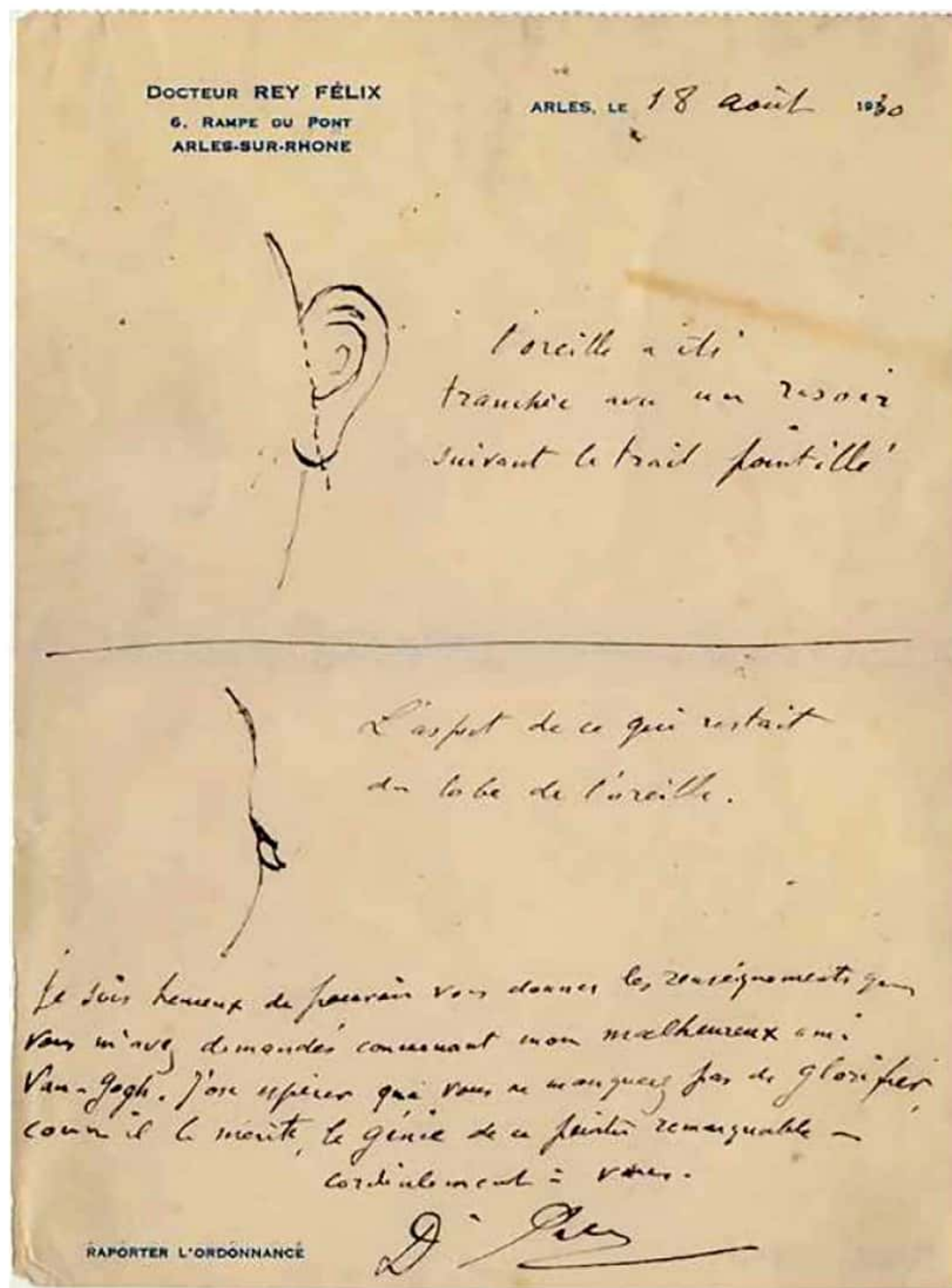




periodic bursts of religiosity: he was “reading the Bible and giving sermons in all the wrong places and to the most vile people, my dear friend had come to believe himself a Christ, a God.” Murphy adds: “It may seem a stretch, but I would suggest... that he gave the girl part of his own healthy body to replace her damaged flesh, and the words he spoke that night (versions of this vary) recalled those of Christ at the last Supper: ‘This is my body... Do this in remembrance of me.’” This seems plausible, if not proven, as it fits with Vincent’s known eccentricities. Murphy successfully demolishes the notions that Gabrielle was the object of Van Gogh’s unrequited lust or that his bizarre act was fuelled by too close an acquaintance with absinthe (which Murphy shows was all but unavailable in Arles, and besides Vincent had little tolerance for alcohol, to add to all his other woes, poor sod).

Murphy, having come this far, was still left with her initial puzzle: did Vincent present Gabrielle with his whole left ear, or only a part of it? Some have said he cut off no more than the lobe. One report, supposedly based on a sketch taken at the time, showed he had hacked off about half of it, but at an angle that Murphy found impossible to replicate (or rather, perhaps, mime). One of the sources for much of the folklore surrounding Van Gogh has been Irving Stone’s 1934 novel *Lust for Life*, later made into a film starring Kirk Douglas, released circa 1956. In 1930 Stone interviewed various people who had had dealings with the artist, but never pretended his book was anything but fiction. His papers – those few he hadn’t destroyed – were lodged at the Bancroft Library of the University of California. Murphy took a long shot, and lo! and behold, there preserved among the files was a sketch of Vincent’s ear and a clear line showing where he had cut it – at an altogether possible angle – plus another showing what remained – pretty much just the lobe. The sketches were made by Dr Félix Rey, the first person to treat Vincent at the hospital in Arles, so one whose memory one might reasonably trust.

Murphy is terrier-like in her pursuit of the facts, and one of the things she uncovers is why, after a couple of weeks out of hospital following his self-mutilation, he broke down again and returned there – where he was put in isolation in a prison-like cell. In this second absence from home a petition to the mayor was got up to have him banished from Arles. According to the folklore this was signed by 100 people or more – hardly a vast proportion of the town’s population



LEFT: Sketches made by Dr Félix Rey of the Arles hospital showing the injury to Van Gogh’s ear. FACING PAGE: A drawing of the Yellow House in one of Van Gogh’s letters.

police sealed the house, which stymied the plot. And the chief of police, an old friend of Vincent, never did forward his findings to the mayor. Thus was Vincent saved from being forced out of Arles. He stayed on in hospital, with occasional forays out, for three months; after that he moved to the private asylum in St-Rémy-de-Provence, where he stayed for 15 months; it’s considered that during these incarcerations he painted many of his finest works. In May 1890 he left to take up lodgings at the Auberge Ravoux in Avers-sur-Oise, about 10 miles from Paris. On 27 July he shot himself in the chest, fatally.

Is this a forteen book? you may be wondering. Yes, it is, and in at least two ways. In the first place, it lays out quite clearly the disjunction between the received

wisdom about Van Gogh – the Chinese whispers about, and the urban legend of, the ‘mad artist’ that we all think we know – and the facts as unearthed by Bernadette Murphy. This book represents an old and honourable forteen endeavour – see for example Bob Rickard’s brilliant interrogation of the story of the 17<sup>th</sup> century nun Sister Maria of Agreda, who allegedly teleported across the Atlantic (FT52:59-65, 177:34-39) – enjoying the story (not that there’s much in Van Gogh’s story to enjoy, exactly) while appreciating the way the legend is unravelled and, if you’re lucky, finding out how it was established. This often involves far more searching, rootling, and exacting excavation than the initial claim would appear to justify at first glance.

And at first glance the received edition of the Van Gogh story doesn’t immediately invite close scrutiny. Everyone knows artists (not just painters: think of Dante, or Beethoven) are a bit bats, some more than others. Slicing off an ear to present to the object of one’s obsession is, okay, a bit of an outlier on the spectrum, but (clearly) not beyond the bounds of possibility. The danger here is to accept lazily the kind of stereotype from which Bernadette Murphy turned away, and didn’t stop digging until she’d found the whole story. And that’s a lesson for us all.

Bernadette Murphy, *Van Gogh’s Ear: The True Story*, Chatto & Windus, 2016.

“THAT’S THE THING ABOUT BOOKS. THEY LET YOU TRAVEL WITHOUT MOVING YOUR FEET.

*Jhumpa Lahiri*

of over 13,000, or even of the 750-odd who lived in Vincent’s immediate neighbourhood. Supposedly, he was habitually drunk, and when drunk molested women and children or followed them into their houses. None of this was true in itself, but by law it was up to the police to investigate the complaint to the mayor; while this was going on, the chief of police had Vincent returned to the hospital. This was in February 1889. Murphy also establishes that the petition contained only 30 signatures: she reproduces it. Some are in identical handwriting. Murphy also worked out that all of these people were cronies of the estate agent who managed the Yellow House, and discovered that he was busy trying to oust Vincent from it and re-lease the property to a tobacco-nist, who wanted to set up a shop there, no doubt for a more profitable rent. There is some justice in the world, though, as the



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## Ghosts from the 1970s

**Andy Paciorek** examines an engaging exploration of a cultural concept familiar to many forteans, drawing on the emotional presence of our memories of TV, music, reading and much more

### Hauntology

#### Ghosts of Futures Past

Merlin Coverley

Oldcastle Books 2020

Pb, 320pp, £12.99, ISBN 9780857304216

Divided into three sections – ‘Hauntings’, ‘Experiments with Time’ and ‘Ghosts of Futures Past’ – this new work by Merlin Coverley sees him embark on a mission to seek out the roots and growth of the cultural phenomenon that is known as hauntology. It is a walk that takes the author and reader down many diverse paths, foremost among them being Memory Lane.

Though it does explore the concept of hauntings and references numerous supernatural films and TV shows, this is not a book about ghosts in the traditional sense but a study of the concept of the cultural mode known as hauntology.

The word hauntology was conceived in 1993 by the French political philosopher Jacques Derrida in his book *Spectres of Marx* as a portmanteau of ‘haunt’ and ‘ontology’ and relates to his concept that Marxism continues to “haunt Western society from beyond the grave”.

However, hauntology has expanded far beyond its original meaning to encompass a certain aesthetic in music, media and art, and beyond that a feeling.

Hauntology is a nebulous creature, difficult to define but always recognised when encountered, at least on an emotional level.

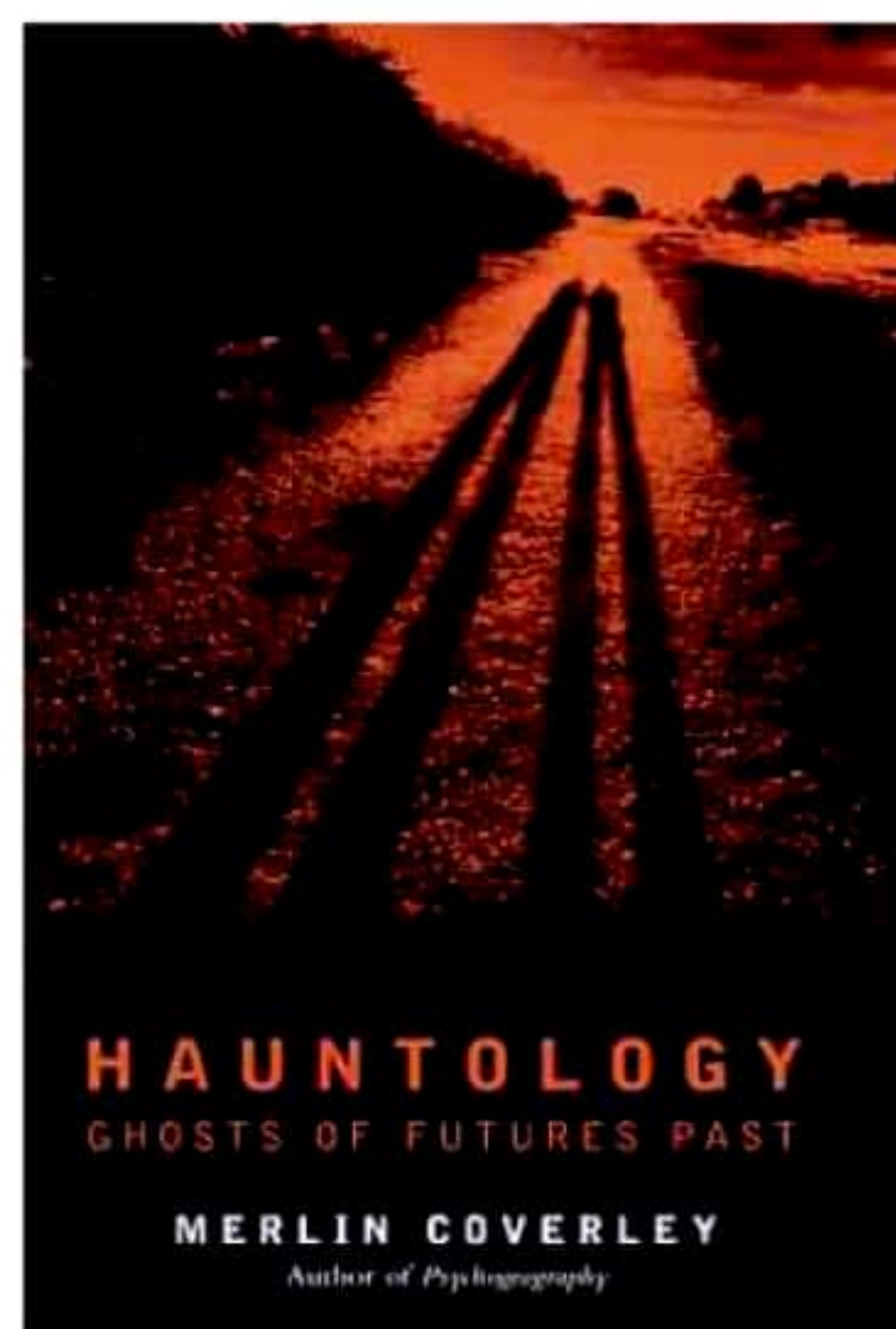
The wider concept of hauntology as an art and thoughtform owes a lot to the writings of cultural historian Mark Fisher and here Coverley joins the dots between the Derridaian and Fisherian views.

Coverley notes the cultural

importance of the 1970s as a fixed point in hauntological time. Notably lying within the formative years of Generation X (or what Bob Fischer has accurately described as ‘The Haunted Generation’, which is evident in the work of Scarfolk and Scarred For Life for example), the 1970s were abundant with weird TV and strange, discordant library music and were politically hard times (a ghost of which resurfaced, I think, in flashbacks of Thatcher and Foot, when May and Corbyn were the UK prime minister and opposition leader).

But Coverley turns the clock back to the 1840s when Marx released the *Communist Manifesto* and Charles Dickens penned ghost stories.

Focusing on Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, Coverley makes



interesting comment on the ghosts and their repetition of the past not only within the story but within the cultural repeating of the tale by readers and viewers each Christmas.

(This set me thinking of how Raymond Briggs’s *The Snowman* animation has now perhaps be-

*Hauntology is a nebulous creature, difficult to define but always recognised*

come a Christmas ghost – each year destined to be reborn and melted – an analogue ghost now haunting a digital house).

The nature of haunting as a recurring point in time or a moment trapped in its environment lends itself to one of the fortean themes that runs through the book: the theories of Charles Babbage, Eleanor Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney and most prominently of TC Lethbridge and the televisual drama *The Stone Tape*, written by the recurringly hauntological explorer Nigel Kneale and first broadcast on Christmas Day 1972.

Other fortean points of interest touched upon within the book’s meanderings include Pepper’s Ghost, JW Dunne’s philosophy of time, Spiritualism, and Alfred Watkins and John Michell’s ‘ley-line’ explorations.

Numerous other authors are encountered as we wind our way through the pages including WG Sebald, MR James, Arthur Machen, Susan Cooper, Alan Garner and JG Ballard.

As with Nigel Kneale, Coverley is most interested in their use of time – how seeming anomalies of time and events can cause a person or place to be haunted.

Memory and nostalgia are key to hauntology, but as we delve deeper it is clear that the nostalgia of hauntology is not a simple fond reverie of bygone times but in using the 1970s as a strong

reference point is something akin to mild trauma, yet with a strange streak of thrill.

The ghost stories of Christmas, weird TV plays, folk horror films and public information films continue to haunt us. But a pertinent point is that these are not simply daydreams of times past but a re-living of a history that has never left us; a past that has just been buried, like the fiends of horror films, waiting for a sequel.

It is the memory of *Tomorrow’s World* predicting the future that is now our present – a world not of personal jet packs and happiness machines but one where the grim ghosts of 1970s austerity, division and unrest not only did not go away, or even stay in the past, but are risen and with us again, haunting our present and future. This is, of course, reflected in the artistic expression of contemporary hauntologists who look at the present through the lens of the past.

Hauntology as a concept may have appeared in the 1990s but it is strangely a notable aspect of our current zeitgeist. We can see its past roots in a lot of contemporary writing, film and music that dwells on the outer edge of the mainstream; but it is not simply retro, it has its originality but is haunted by the past. A catharsis of demons still needing to be exorcised perhaps.

Coverley’s book is thought-provoking and, although rather academic, engaging; but it is theoretically focused and therefore perhaps not the best starting point for anyone fresh to hauntology. However, for anyone already immersed and seeking to dig deeper into the subject it is a great addition to the haunted bookshelf.

★★★★★



## Seeing the light

David Clarke looks at a painstaking study analysing a mysterious phenomenon

### The Marfa Lights

Examining the Photographic Evidence (2003-2007)

Manuel Borraz Aymerich & Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos

FOTOCAT Report #8, July 2020

[https://www.academia.edu/43589341/THE\\_MARFA\\_LIGHTS\\_Examining\\_the\\_Photographic\\_Evidence\\_2003\\_2007](https://www.academia.edu/43589341/THE_MARFA_LIGHTS_Examining_the_Photographic_Evidence_2003_2007)

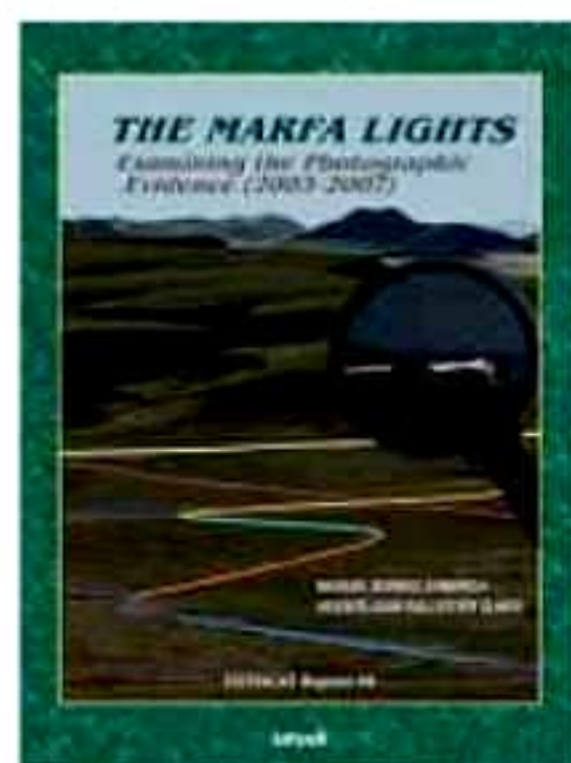
Mystery lights or “ghost lights” that haunt specific landscapes are a familiar motif in supernatural folklore. Possibly the best known are the Marfa Lights that are a tourist attraction for the small West Texas town nestled in a desert-mountain region near the Mexican border. In 2001 a “viewing station” was installed nine miles east of Marfa on Highway 90, that provides a year-round observation point over an area of desert scrubland called Mitchell Flat. From here mysterious lights can regularly be seen flitting below the Chinati Mountains, 60 miles (96km) away to the south west.

The most popular explanation is headlights of vehicles travelling along the US Route 67 between Marfa and Presidio. Past investigations by scientists and researchers, including FT’s own Paul Devereux, confirmed many observations could be traced to distant vehicular headlights moving along undulating desert roads. From the viewing station the Marfa lights appear like “mysterious lights skimming the ground, fusing, and parting”.

Since the 1980s dozens of photographs and moving footage of the lights have featured on shows like *Unsolved Mysteries*. Retired aerospace engineer James Bunnell captured these phenomena on film, collating his findings in a series of illustrated books. From 2003 he set up monitoring stations equipped with cameras near the viewing station. He is confident he can separate

the “genuine” lights from the regularly misidentified vehicle headlights. His work piqued the interest of Manuel Aymerich and veteran Spanish ufologist Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos who operate FOTOCAT, a worldwide cataloguing project that has some 12,000 UAP images on its database.

As in ufology, a stubborn residue of Marfa light experiences resist explanation. These fall into two categories: anecdotal stories and the hard evidence captured on film. The Spanish team concentrated their attention on the best evidence, obtained from 2003



to 2007, that Bunnell believes represents a type of unknown natural phenomenon new to science. The FOTOCAT project scrutinised 17 of Bunnell’s most impressive photographs using the

Google Earth Photo Overlay tool that allowed them to produce a 3D representation of the Marfa landscape. After a year of painstaking analysis they identified errors in the information Bunnell had used in his calculations. They found the simplest explanation was correct. The Marfa lights – even the so-called “genuine” unexplained cases – are vehicle lights: “in every single event when geographical verification has been possible (assisted by Google Earth) the photographed luminous trails match with local roads”.

The fully illustrated 174-page report is a classic example of what tends to happen when a rigorous scientific methodology is applied to extraordinary “evidence” of the type often associated with UAPs. The FOTOCAT report can be downloaded free from Academia.edu, but there are plans for a full-colour print edition from UPIAR, an Italian press, available via Amazon.

## Researching the Paranormal

How to Find Reliable Information about Parapsychology, Ghosts, Astrology, Cryptozoology, Near-Death Experiences and More

Courtney M Block

Rowman & Littlefield 2020

Hb, 342pp, £42, ISBN 9781538131442

There has not previously been a book specifically about how to research the paranormal. Academic librarian Courtney Block aims to help those who may feel embarrassed or confused about approaching unconventional research topics such as ghosts and parapsychology, ufology, cryptozoology and occult/divination topics. Clearly knowledgeable across a broad scope of paranormal themes and ideas, she says this book focuses primarily on supplying a selection of scholarly and academic references on all these topics to “shine a light on the myriad research that has been done to understand the paranormal”. It’s her fervent wish to remove the “stigma” that these topics have and to promote “citizen scientists” who are “pushing the boundary of what it means for something to be investigated scientifically”.

Emphasising the importance of a scientific and scholarly approach, Block states without elaborating that paranormal research challenges the academic status quo and hints that materialistic science may hamper this kind of research. So, the reader is left wondering, what kind of science and scholarship is Block talking about? The intended audience for this book is also a mystery. Is this a guide for ghost hunters, teens doing research papers, or writers? Parts of the book are overly simplistic, as if written for someone who has never used a library before. The reading recommendations, however, are often scholarly content that the average non-specialist would find far too challenging to digest.

Block’s research protocol is disjointed and not easy to follow. She says not to use Google as a first step to research – yet professionals often begin with broad searches and Wikipedia to orientate oneself to the subject

matter prior to a deep dive. Website archives are not listed and highlighted. Instead, the author leans heavily on scholarly journals. (She is silent on why cryptozoology and ufology have no dedicated journals listed.)

University programmes, organisations, museums and special collections are given many pages – sources that would be useful mostly for academic research. But this list barely scrapes the surface of useful material. The sections for books and articles suffer from a similar small sampling, including only a tiny smattering, not even the core literature, for each topic. With the massive scope of such topics, all end up short-changed and lacking suitable modern context. Block never mentions anomalistic psychology, and barely touches on sociological studies.

Material from the UK is peppered throughout (mostly related to the Society for Psychical Research) but the remainder is clumped into a strange, disconnected and aimless last chapter that walks the reader through famous paranormal sites and “magical practices” of the UK.

A rambling narrative is not an effective vehicle for instruction. The clunky titles, casual language and repetition also reveal the lack of an editorial hand. The use of many contemporary sources, tools and brands means this book will age fairly quickly.

The multi-task effort Block shouldered is just too huge and complex for one book; it would have worked better as a website or shorter books on each topic. The reader comes away with a hodgepodge of information and suggestions, but no clear pathway for researching the paranormal.

Sharon Hill

★ ★

## Bad News

Why We Fall For Fake News

Rob Brotherton

Bloomsbury Sigma 2020

Hb, 352pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781472962850

The subject of fake news is a natural successor to psychologist Rob Brotherton’s excellent *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe in Conspiracy Theories*.

*Bad News* begins with the nationwide panic following the radio broadcast of Orson Welles’s





*War of the Worlds* in 1938 – a panic which we all know never happened, being almost entirely the creation of a sensation-hungry media. Many of the news stories were elitist: of course *we* saw through it immediately, but look at those other suckers who were taken in by it.

But following that promising start there are long chapters on, in turn, why bad news is more interesting than good news; why breaking news (even when it isn't, really) is more exciting than ordinary news; and why we're caught in the contradiction of wanting more and more news while at the same time suffering news fatigue. We're halfway through the book before we reach echo chambers – the fact that we prefer to surround ourselves with people, information and news that we're already familiar with and that we know we agree with, giving rise to terms like “filter bubbles” and “congeniality bias” – though Brotherton dismisses this as unimportant.

Pictures help us to notice, remember and believe stories, whether they are true or false (he touches briefly on experiments implanting false memories); because of this, newspapers have touched up photos since the very beginning, long before Photoshop and the digital manipulation of video deepfakes.

When we move into the realm of “post-truth”, fact and opinion can easily become blurred – but it's rather stating the obvious to say: “Our prior beliefs and group allegiances can affect our perception of anything we see.”

The final chapter deals with newspaper accuracy, with the startling datum that roughly half of all stories in newspapers contain inaccuracies. But honest careless mistakes aren't the same as fake news, “meaning outright lies masquerading as news”. That's almost the only mention of fake news in the chapter, indeed, in the book.

*Bad News* is a reasonable psychological discussion of the wider problems of news journalism; but its completely misleading subtitle is itself fake news.

Jay Vickers

★ ★



## Pigspurt's Daughter

**A Mythic Dad, a Legacy of Lunacy**

Daisy Eris Campbell

Hilaritas Press 2020

Pb, 105pp, £11.33, ISBN 9780998713489

Daisy Eris Campbell – named Eris after the Greek goddess of Chaos (Roman Discordia) by her father Ken Campbell, the irrepressible, indefinable, anarchic genius of the theatre [obit FT242:30-31] – was conceived in the Liverpool Everyman on the set of *Illuminatus!*, Ken's adaptation of the hilarious conspiracy-sendup trilogy by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, West Coast libertarian and guerrilla ontologist. (Both Ken and Bob Wilson were enthusiastic cheerleaders for *Fortean Times* since its inception in the Seventies.) Daisy made her name with the 1997 revival of *The Warp* (the longest play in the world, originally staged by Ken in 1979.)

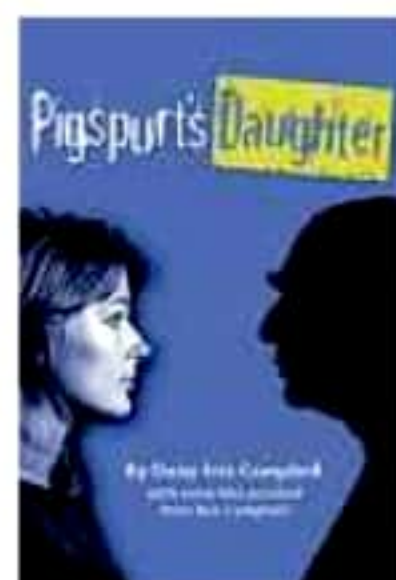
*Pigspurt's Daughter*, subtitled “A mythic dad, a legacy of lunacy”, is an entertaining *jeu d'esprit*, performed in 2018, a decade after Ken's death, in the spirit of his celebrated monologues. As John Higgs puts it in his foreword: “Daisy climbs inside her father's work, simultaneously resurrecting him and laying him to rest.”

Ken took Daisy to a Robert McKee story structure course when she was 11, where she learned about “The Gap”. She explains: “The Gap is what exists between your expectation of what should reasonably happen in a reasonable universe populated by reasonable people – and what actually happens.”

The Gap leads to The Story.

When Daisy was 15, Ken took her to the Swiss Alps where the Solar Temple adepts performed mass suicide; to the cultic caves in Damanhur, Italy; to Rennes-le-Château; and to the Cathars' last stronghold in Montségur. Ken incited her to seek the negation of the negation and to astound her Self into existence, which is sort of what *Pigspurt's Daughter* is about – along with the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu.

FT readers will appreciate this eminently fortean point of view: “And I'm thinking of what my dad used to say to me – Now, listen



Daisy – Don't believe in anything – Nothing which is the product of the human mind is a fitting subject for belief – but you can suppose everything – and in fact you should – supposing as much as possible is mind opening mind widening – suppose fairies – suppose flying saucers – suppose in life after death – I suppose you could suppose that one of the big religions had got it right to the last nut and bolt – But listen Daisy – Don't believe it.”

Paul Sieveking

★ ★ ★ ★

## A History of the Medicines We Take

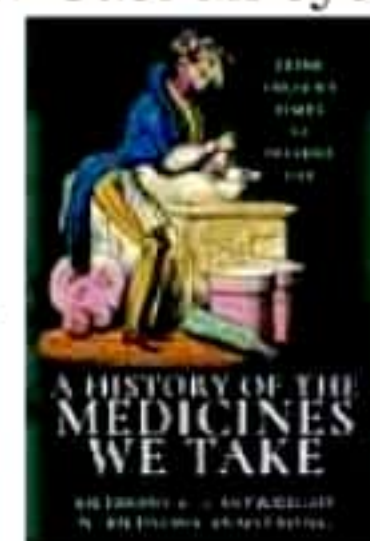
**From Ancient Times to the Present Day**

Anthony C Cartwright & N Anthony Armstrong

Pen & Sword 2020

Pb, 317pp, £18.99, ISBN 9781526724038

Here's a title that catches the fortean eye. There are so many questions the authors might explore: to capture the experience of taking different remedies over time and space? Or try to untangle the mysterious workings of the placebo affect? Cast an eye over the growth of global pharmaceutical corporations? Or ask why the anti-vaccination movement has grown in recent years?



You won't find answers to these kinds of questions here. This really isn't a history of *why* we take medicines but, at its core, a history of *how* we take them: by mouth, by injection, etc – though the book's deadening prose fails to put across any of the importance or relevance of the topic.

The first half consists of a Plato to NATO-style trudge through pharmaceutical history, which even with its mentions of early Islamic physicians is very much from a Western perspective.

The pharmacy industry plays an oddly passive role in this history. Discoveries are made, businesses grow, but these events seem to exist independently of culture and society. The commercial aspect of the pharmaceutical business disappears the closer we get to the present day. There is little in the book on the massive rise of lifestyle drugs for self-

improvement rather than cure – and even less on psychopharmacology (an astonishing absence given current debates around the increasing pathologising of certain conditions).

Structural flaws don't help: there's no setting out of the book's argument in its preface and no unifying conclusion to round things off. It's also riddled with repetition – we're re-introduced numerous times in part two, to characters we met in part one; it clearly needed a stronger edit. The book, certainly, contains factual information – but then, so does a medicine's information leaflet. And a warning often found there could apply to this book: “may cause drowsiness”.

Ross MacFarlane

★ ★

## The Clock Mirage

**Our Myth of Measured Time**

Joseph Mazur

Yale University Press 2020

Hb, 272pp, £20, ISBN 9780300229325

This is a frustratingly rambling book. Mazur takes his time getting to his point. He starts with the huge difference between “objective” time as measured by clocks and “subjective” time as perceived by the human mind. The former is mechanically regular and predictable; the latter is highly variable depending on circumstances. He concludes that subjective time is the real thing, and objective time is an illusion.

That's an eccentric view, to say the least. As mysterious and fascinating as subjective time is, I suspect it's the real “mirage”. Global society would be impossible without the ability to measure objective time accurately. If a grandparent's perception of the time between a child's birthdays is wildly different from the child's own, how can they both be right? Mazur only devotes the last third of the book to untangling these issues. Before that he takes a leisurely stroll through the science and philosophy of “objective time”. He does this quite well, and if the book had been packaged differently, as a history of our understanding and use of time, I might have enjoyed it more.

Andrew May

★ ★ ★





# Tarot for today

A huge pictorial compendium of Tarot designs and a highly original new deck celebrating women in science

## Tarot

Jessica Hundley (ed.) Penny Slinger, Johannes Fiebig, Thunderwing

Taschen 2020

Hb, 520pp, £30, ISBN 9783836579872

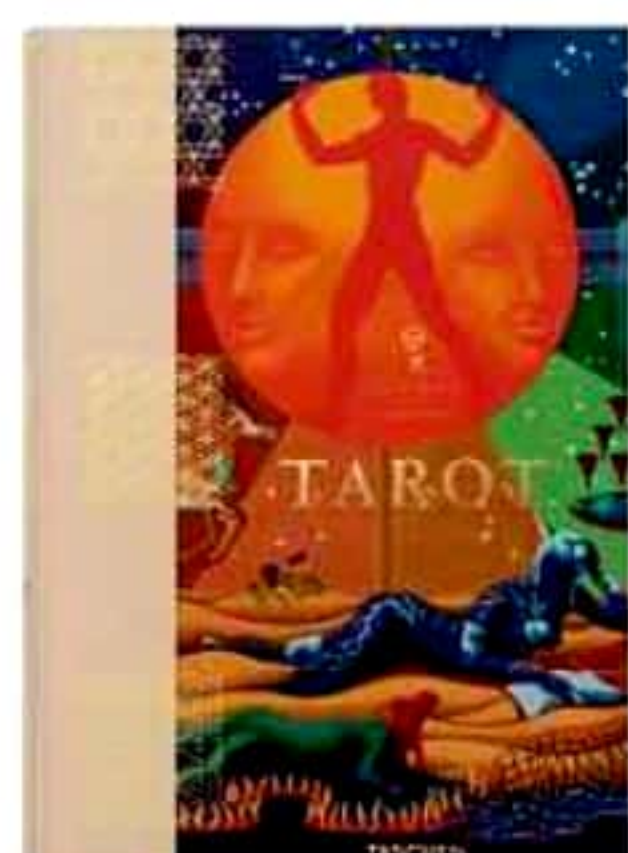
## The Women in Science Tarot

Massive Science, illustrated by Matteo Farinella

MIT Press 2020

78 cards plus 94-page booklet, £27.50, ISBN 9780262539937

The tarot has long been known as the Devil's picture book so it's fitting there's a book of all the best pages. Unsurprisingly, given



the publisher, Taschen's Tarot book devotes most of its 500 full-colour pages to beautiful, interesting or just plain eccentric designs from many different tarot decks, many of which appear in book form for the first time. There are some brief essays, however, starting with the murky history of tarot – did it evolve from Egyptian hieroglyphics or simply from a European card game? An Italian printing sheet c. 1500 shows the symbolism of the major arcana has changed little in 500 years.

Most of this book is given over to the major arcana. Megan Wyreweden's Anima Mundi reinvents the Hermit as a contented octopus. Alexander Daniloff draws on mediæval imagery to create the Moon in blues and golds. The Annabella Magic Noir tarot's depiction of the World could only be from the 1970s. The Thompson Long tarot, given free with a 1930s magazine, twists Pamela Colman Smith's iconic designs for the Rider-Waite into something unbearably twee.

A smaller section showing

examples of the minor arcana is followed by brief biographies of notable tarot creators including Colman Smith, Lady Frieda Harris, who collaborated with Crowley on the Thoth tarot, Papus and Manley P Hall. After a chapter on the use of tarot imagery in modern art, the book concludes by considering tarot as mirrors; how we interpret the symbolism is deeply personal. As Arthur Waite notes: "The pictures are like doors which open into unexpected chambers..."

Tarot is the first in Taschen's Library of Esoterica series. I'm looking forward to future volumes.

My earliest experience of tarot was reading for friends by candlelight with incense burning and a well-thumbed beginner's guide handy. It didn't take long for me to appreciate tarot for more than fortune-telling, though. The cards became an aid to meditation, an addition to magical ritual, a way of telling stories and, sometimes, art galleries in miniature.

I wouldn't even try to use the Women in Science Tarot for readings, but it's a wonderfully novel way to portray both scientific concepts and the women who have contributed so much to the advancement



of scientific knowledge. The major arcana illustrates the traditional Fool's journey from ignorance to transcendence using images from the history of science. The Fool herself is Evolution, the first amphibian dragging itself onto the shore of an island populated by giant dragonflies and strange trees. The powerful images continue: the male archetype of the Emperor is Robert Oppenheimer, pictured against a mushroom cloud. The transformative power of Death is symbolised by an

early mammal snuffling about in a dinosaur graveyard. The Star shows ancient Egyptian astrology, while Judgment is straight out of Fritz Lang's Metropolis, with naked humans in thrall to a giant robot, both anticipating and fearing the singularity.

The minor arcana repurposes the four traditional suits. Wands



become Micro, the element of Fire bringing about transformation at a molecular level. Nano echoes the intuitive

nature of Cups by representing theoretical sciences such as maths and physics. Macro adapts the element of Earth normally represented by Pentacles or Coins to the sciences of ecology and geology. Astro takes the element of Air, traditionally Swords, up into space with cosmology and astronomy.

Each of the minor trumps is represented by a woman who has made a significant contribution to the advancement of science. The Nine of Pentacles in the popular Rider-Waite-Smith deck shows a grand lady in her garden. The Women in Science deck offers instead environmentalist and opponent of pesticides Rachel Carson. Without her, the card implies, there would be no garden.

Such an original way of approaching the history of science will have its critics; I don't expect to see something so "occult" in the school science lab any time soon. That's a shame, as it captures beautifully the mystery and curiosity that drives scientific progress and provides 56 inspirational female role models for the scientists of the future.

Paula Dempsey

Tarot ★★★★★

Women in Science Tarot ★★★★★

## Alien Abduction

### The Control Factor

Jim Bouck & Robert Long

Schiffer Publishing 2020

Pb, 160pp, £17.99, ISBN 9780764359668

The authors admit it is difficult to discern whether someone has been abducted by aliens or not. Searching for signs such as recent scars, implants and missing time is the equivalent of looking for the mark of the Devil, although Budd Hopkins is favourably quoted as noting "I can't tell [potential abductees] if they have or haven't been abducted. Only they themselves with the experience can make that determination." This means anyone can say they are an abductee, and it is a bit rich considering Hopkins used his "expertise" to convince so many they were abducted by aliens.

Here the usual abduction propaganda is wheeled out, including such loopy stories as the Linda Cortile abduction and Katharina Wilson's bout of invisibility at O'Hare International Airport. The authors confess there is only anecdotal evidence for abductions – admitting implants, for example, miraculously disap-



pear when removed – and they can only point to the ludicrously flimsy statistical evidence that millions of Americans have been abducted.

Nonetheless they trundle out the beliefs that abductions run in families, there is human military/alien interaction, they are conducting a hybrid breeding programme and they use advanced technology to manipulate and control us.

Considerable space is given to how human memory works, but this is skewed to prove how the aliens manipulate our minds rather than to understand how our minds can "create" alien experiences. In conclusion, the authors, who have both worked for MUFON, think the marvels of quantum physics help explain alien abduction technology. It is a pity they are not more critical of the "evidence" and do not give room for more credible and wide-ranging theories.

Nigel Watson

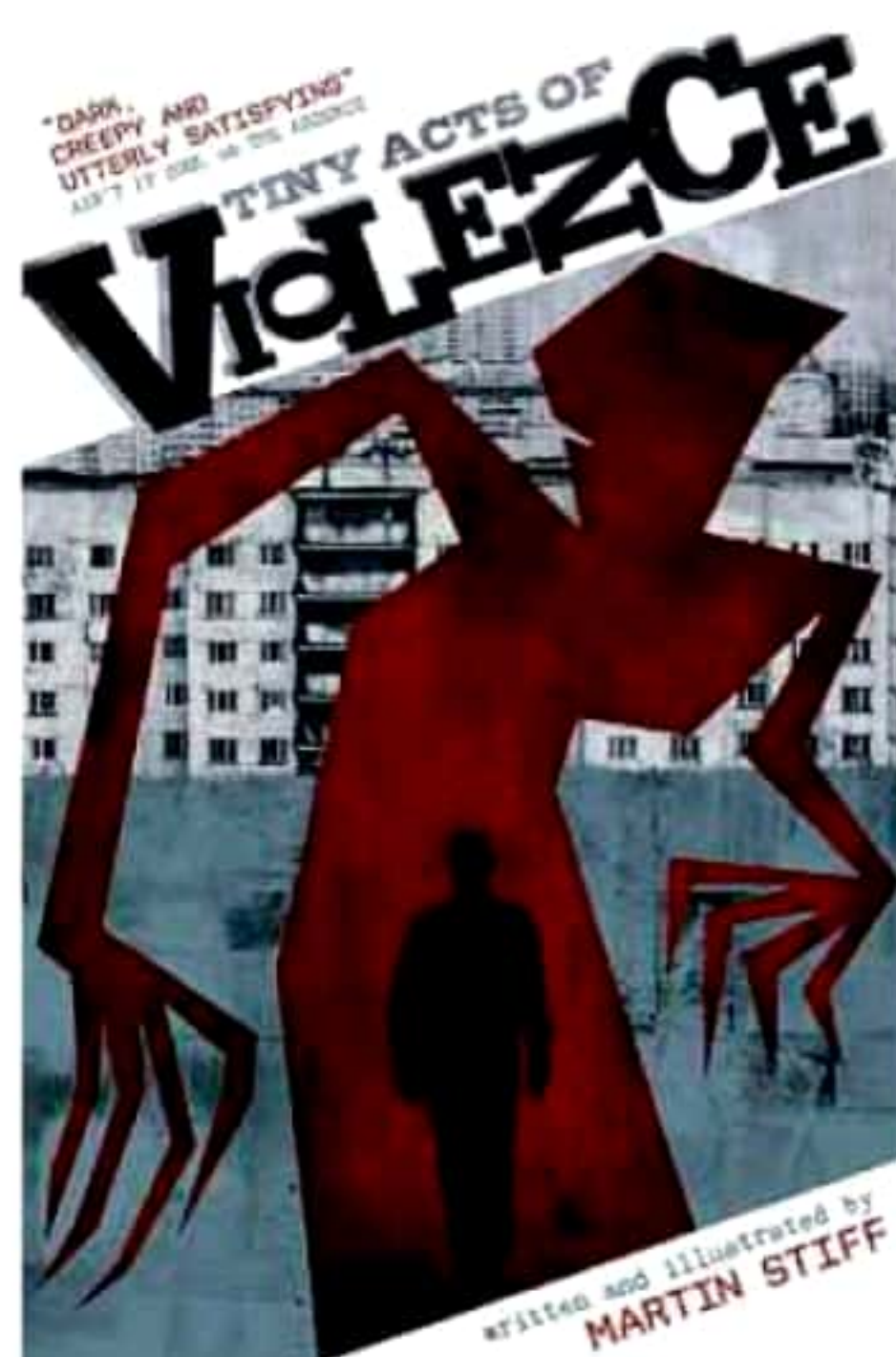
★★





## COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART



### Tiny Acts of Violence

Martin Stiff

Comic Toolbox, 2020

Hb, pp224, £23.99, ISBN 9781838131203

In terms of fantastic fiction the German Democratic Republic is an underused setting. We're more used to encountering East Germany in spy stories than horror stories, yet the sense of paranoia and betrayal, and the complex relationship of citizens with the state (such as in the film *Good Bye, Lenin!*), makes it a perfect location for horror fiction.

We see all these elements coming into play in Martin Stiff's latest comic. *Tiny Acts of Violence* focuses on Sebastian Metzger, a teacher, ex-officer of the Stasi (the DDR's omnipotent state security apparatus), and very damaged person. Something is stalking Metzger, a figure glimpsed by reporter Astrid Kruckel, who is dragged further and further into Metzger's orbit.

The comic is intercut with one of the Grimm Brothers' fairytales. This story of two siblings really captures, for me, the theme that seems to be at the comic's heart: the damage that can be inflicted on families trying to survive in a city perfectly described by Stiff as "like a coil of wire. It turns its citizens into magnets. It pulls them into conformity."

In both art and storyline, Stiff perfectly captures a sense of the hidden, whether that is the unexploded bomb under the street, the informer at the kitchen table, or the stalkers in the shadows: you can almost

taste the cloying paranoia in his portrayal of East Berlin.

Complicity is a big theme here, as well as the monsters that complicity can create, both social and metaphorical. The artwork embodies a claustrophobic sense of the narrative closing in, an effect enhanced by very specific colour choices. One of my favourite examples is on the first double-page spread. Over a series of six panels, a smear of blood transforms first to brick, then the lesions patterning Metzger's body, against a background image of the barbed-wire-topped Berlin Wall. People carry the city within them, silent and hidden, and Stiff teases out their secrets and conflicts.

I'd highly recommend this comic, which manages to be an effective monster story as well as a social examination of living under very attentive state mechanisms.

### Monster MACS

John Reppion and PJ Holden

Twitter.com/@Monster\_MACS,

www.patreon.com/holdenreppion

Anyone who follows #folklore-thursday on Twitter will almost certainly have seen John Reppion and PJ Holden's small comics based on different folkloric themes. This has proved so successful that they've started a new ongoing fortaean series aimed at younger readers. *Monster MACS* follows the adventures of the Macintosh Area Cryptozoological Society (made up of Li, Evie, Biko, and Fort the dog) as they search for strange beasts in Macintosh.

As of writing, only one issue has come out (John and PJ are posting them every Saturday), but I can report that the artwork is lush, with just the right balance of humour and mystery to introduce your children to the joys of cryptozoology and fortaena. While they will be sharing the comic via Twitter, as with any of these independent comics, it's good to support the creators, and you can do that via Patreon, where you'll get a chance to see the comics before anyone else, plus access to sketches, scripts and so on.

### Nicnevin and the Bloody Queen

Helen Mullane, Dom Reardon

H1 (Humanoids), 2020

Pb, pp128, £14.99, ISBN 9781643377131



On one level, *Nicnevin and the Bloody Queen* is a coming of age story, with all the touchstones you'd expect from such a tale:

school exclusion, family angst, teenage crushes and boredom – yet there is so much going on here. Following the aforementioned exclusion, Nicnevin, her mother and younger brother Gowan, travel to Yeavinger, Northumberland, for a summer in the mother's family home.

While this might be set up to play as a fish out of water story, the connections between the family and the landscape are deep – and what a landscape it is, beautifully captured in the Dom Reardon's art and Lee Loughridge's colourwork. Both bring Helen Mullane's storytelling to life. This is a tale that entwines and entrances, weaving together modern life, folklore, and nature red in tooth and claw. It's elegantly paced and, from the first appearance of a bisected barghest crowned with mistletoe, visceral and uncompromising.

To bring together so many themes is no easy task, but the creative team have produced a comic that will appeal to those who love to see the darker side of folktales brought to life. Highly recommended.

### Trad Stories

Lex Lamb

www.tradcomic.com, 2020

Digital, 40pp, £10

Trad Stories is a joy, packed with enough symbology, fortaena and general weirdness to delight readers of this magazine. Trad is a ghost, or an interdimensional being, or a god (though certainly not omnipotent). At times his decisions seem callous, but Trad just does.

Many fortaena topics appear in the nine stories Lex has collected in this volume, from the

strangeness of electricity pylons, to underground tunnel networks built by the Manhole Guild, mysterious musical notes, modons, and otherworldly lights. As well as Trad, Lex includes a supporting cast filled with tourists, researchers, musicians, airmen, and Accidental Death.

Trad Stories strikes me as surrealism in the truest sense. Even after two sittings, each one a pleasure, I'm sure there is so much I've missed that it definitely warrants spending more time with Trad as he passes through the vast number of worlds he inhabits.

### Early Haunts

TW Burgess, Mike O'Brien, David Romero, Bri Neumann

www.kickstarter.com/projects/manoghosts/early-haunts-a-horror-anthology-of-early-ghost-stories/

Digital, 110pp



*Early Haunts*, containing stories adapted by TW Burgess, is a lovely thing. The collection presents a

series of ghost stories, each with an introduction explaining how they influenced later writers. The book opens with 'The House in Athens', a story attributed to Pliny the Younger, before going on to 'The Death Bride', 'The Wild Huntsman', and 'The Tale of Dish Mansion'. Although the stories have been adapted by Burgess, each has a different artist and its own distinct character; even the lettering has been tailored to the particular story. The short essays link the tales to works by Dickens, Mary Shelley, Washington Irving and Koji Suzuki. These are just the right length – informative without overpowering the stories. If I had to choose a single piece of art, it would be the visceral portrayal of 'The Death Bride' on the cover page for that story.

The finished volume will also include panels which become animated using a free app. As I write, the Kickstarter is underway, so there may be more content as the project hits its goals. The weblink above is probably the best way to keep up to date with the evolving project.



SEND REVIEW DISCS TO: FORTEAN TIMES, PO BOX 71602, LONDON E17 0QD, UK.

## Online unease

With most cinemas closed once again, why not stay home and scare yourself silly with a topical horror movie for the age of the Zoom call? Plus: more digital and home entertainment releases.



### Host

Dir Rob Savage, UK 2020  
On digital platforms

It had to happen. At the beginning of this year people were digging out older films like *Contagion*, *Outbreak* and even *Dawn of the Dead* to give them some pointers about what do to if things ever got *that* bad, or perhaps just as a sort of morbid fascination with the end of days. But by the middle of the year the Covid-19 pandemic and concomitant restrictions were inspiring new productions. *Host*, made by the Shudder channel, is a fine example of that.

The premise, in more normal times, would have been routine: a group of friends gathers for a séance and it all goes tits-up. In the time of coronavirus, however, the séance is being hosted on Zoom and the participants are all in separate locations. No holding hands around the table here then.

I'm usually highly suspicious of these à la mode films: no-one remembers *The Net* or *feardotcom* any more do they? *Host* is very

*Sure, this is an exploitation movie, but it's a superior one*

much a 21st century production: I never thought I'd see a film where fear could arise out of an Ocado delivery, or a dropped Internet connection. But, to my surprise, it actually works incredibly well. The way director Rob Savage turns the real-life social distancing restrictions into an advantage and incorporates them into the story is superb. As per Zoom calls, the cast are all on screen at the same time in their separate windows, so the viewing experience is markedly different to that of most films in that the viewer can choose where to focus their attention. There may be dialogue being spoken in one window whereas something visual is taking place in another, and in yet another someone may be reacting to either of the first two.

Remarkably for a movie that runs less than an hour, it takes its time setting up its characters and situation, which is always to a film's benefit. The acting helps tremendously too: you probably won't have heard of any of the cast but they all do a fine job. The only criticism I would offer is that the short running time means the director leaves himself far too much to do in the last 10 minutes or so and it starts to feel rushed and, as a consequence, less effective. But that's a minor quibble. Sure, this is an exploitation movie, but it's a superior one.

Daniel King



### Archive

Dir Gavin Rothery, UK 2020  
On UK release + digital platforms

In the near-ish future, robotics expert George Almore (Theo James) is working on producing a human equivalent AI. But he is concealing his true goal from his employers: bringing his dead

wife Jules (Stacy Martin) back to life. The 'Archive' of the title is a service that (somehow; it's never really made clear) retains the consciousness of departed loved ones in a memory bank to allow relatives to speak to them for a limited time – 200 hours – after death. Almore wants to implant this retained consciousness into a state-of-the-art robot, preserving it, thus effectively giving his wife a second life.

Confused? You shouldn't be. The plot may be word salad, but essentially it's a race against time for Almore to complete his work before the antagonists, represented by his rather sinister employer Simone (Rhona Mitra) and an Archive agent (Toby Jones) both desperate to get their hands on the fruits of his labours.

Aside from being an engrossing sci-fi thriller, *Archive* offers an exploration of themes such as grief, free will, jealousy, and consent. It's a neat trick to explore such uniquely human emotions via robots. But perhaps more than these, the film is about time: whether that be the past, or the attempt to recapture or remake lost time in the future. As Willie Nelson croaks on the soundtrack "...ain't it funny how time slips away?"

However, one should not be expecting much in the way of profundity here. This isn't Proust. *Archive* is above all things a designer's film, which should come as no surprise because writer-director Rothery has come up through the industry as exactly that, most notably on Duncan Jones's excellent *Moon*, a film this closely resembles. This is Rothery's first feature as a director and for quite understandable reasons he has leaned heavily on things he's comfortable with.

On the plus side, he has produced a film which looks much better than its relatively low budget would normally





allow. Almore's research facility alone is a thing of wonderment, as if Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater had been modernised by Roger Dean. The film is full of spectacular drone shots of wintry forests and majestic waterfalls which are stunning but, and this can be the downside of having an artist direct a film, they advance the plot not at all. It's a charge that was often levelled at David Lean. Think of *Lawrence of Arabia* and those incredible shots of camels moving slowly along the horizon and Peter O'Toole wandering off into the blazing desert, and yet what do we really know about TE Lawrence by the end? Not much. It's the same here.

Nevertheless, there's a lot to enjoy. It's refreshing to come across a thriller where there's very little violence and people are motivated by love rather than revenge. It's also good to see a genre film which has genuine ambition in terms of the themes it chooses to explore. Okay, it might not reach any great understanding of them, but the attempt is made. Theo James and Stacy Martin don't quite have the acting chops to carry a film virtually by themselves, but they do at least make an engaging couple. Worth a look.

Daniel King



## The Dare

**Dir Giles Alderson, UK/US 2019**  
**Lionsgate, £5.99 (DVD) + digital**

There are lots of ways a film can be bad: some are entertainingly bad, some are boringly bad, and some films are so bad they can actually make you angry. *The Dare*, I'm sorry to say, is in the latter category. It is so unoriginal in thought, so desultory in execution and so low in ambition that it almost constitutes a slap in the face to the viewer, as if to say 'Sucker!'

Normally at this point there would be a short summary of the plot; however, the plot in this instance is so over-familiar and threadbare that 'A man wakes up chained to a wall in a dingy room...' tells you all need to know about what you'll see and what will transpire. There will be an abattoir, fingernails coming

off, torture, masked killers and so on, almost literally ad nauseam.

*The Dare* isn't the only film to have ripped off *Saw* – but, for heaven's sake, *Saw* came out 16 years ago. Even then it wasn't any great shakes, but it did at least have originality on its side and a (sort of) name cast in Cary Elwes and Danny Glover. *The Dare* has none of that: with all due respect to them, the likes of Bart Edwards, Richard Short, and Alexandra Evans are not, at this stage of their careers, going to draw the crowds. The most well-known actor involved is Richard Brake, a genre veteran and fine actor to boot, but even he is unknown to most save the cognoscenti.

So the film grinds remorselessly on for well over 90 minutes, painfully aware of its own mediocrity, dragging itself out in the vain hope that, somehow, something might spark it into life if it just keeps going long enough. That moment never comes and the film finally throws in the towel with an ending so predictable and cynical that one can only wonder why those involved cared so little for the project. Even Jess Franco took more care over his films than does Giles Alderson here.

It may be that *The Dare* will eventually find a niche but, if so, only as a drinking game. You know the kind of thing: take a drink when you see some rusty tools; take a drink when someone says "Fuck you! I'm getting out of here." Well, quite.

Daniel King



## Echoes of Fear

**Dir Brian Avenet-Bradley, Laurence Avenet-Bradley, US 2019**  
**On digital platforms**

Student Alysa temporarily moves into her deceased grandfather's house to prepare it for sale and finds it haunted by restless spirits in Brian and Laurence Avenet-Bradley's cheapo effort. In these postmodern days, haunted house tales really need a hook. Here they go for broke, including not just ghostly apparitions but also scary squatters and masked maniacs. There are the glimmerings of

something interesting hidden in the film's darkest recesses, but they are lost in the ready-meal mechanics that surround them and hampered by a script that consistently misses its beats.

Low budget needn't be a problem, especially when it comes to horror, but here the video-ish murk of the picture only adds to the dreariness that abounds. It's non-stop clichés and hoary tropes, all played without a hint of irony. Dodgy neighbour, jerk boyfriend, best friend who is conveniently well-versed in the supernatural? Tick, tick, tick. Weird toy moves on its own? Tick. Shadowy figure passes by while protagonist is looking the other way? Tick. Shot is held for far too long to 'build tension' before a demon leaps out for a boo? Tick.

The generic but serviceable atmospherics – rattlings, rumbling, a pale face emerging from a dark doorway – are let down by the endless cheap jump scares and the listless direction. There are interminable scenes of the heroine discovering strange objects in hidden rooms, while so much attention is focused on her pet hamster that I began to wonder if it was going to turn out to be possessed (it isn't, sadly). The ending is woefully flat and unsatisfying, not even offering the easy emotional pay-off that has been promised from the very start. Avoid at all costs.

Martin Parsons



## The New Mutants

**Dir Josh Boone, US 2020**  
**Walt Disney, £14.99 (Blu-ray), £11.99 (DVD) + digital platforms**

*The New Mutants* represents the last gasp of Fox's 20-year stewardship of Marvel's X-Men. The words "not with a bang but a whimper" sprang to mind when, after a repeatedly delayed release saw the project in limbo for nearly three years, the film finally emerged for a brief cinema run in the middle of a global pandemic. Now, it finally dribbles onto DVD and Blu-ray, a forgettable coda to Fox's wildy uneven series of 13 X-movies.

When the first *X-Men* film came out in 2000 it was rightly seen as a game-changer for superhero cinema, laying much

of the groundwork for what was to follow; *The New Mutants*, in stark contrast, feels thin and generic. It's a shame, as the comic series it is based on – the very first spin-off title from *The X-Men* – was one of the great titles of the 1980s, featuring writer Chris Claremont at the top of his game and introducing the genuinely envelope-pushing art of Bill Sienkiewicz to a wider audience. It was also a lot of fun: focusing on a new generation of mutants, with a strong emphasis on ethnic diversity, interpersonal relationships and teenage angst, the book managed to navigate different, often darker, waters to its parent title while remaining an addictive and life-affirming monthly read. Unfortunately, none of the joy and little of the fun survives Josh Boone's decision to transform the source material into a painfully earnest young-adult horror flick with dour visuals and feeble scares. Instead of navigating their growing pains under the tutelage of Professor X, Boone's youngsters find themselves imprisoned in a decaying hospital facility where they are monitored by a mysterious Dr Reyes. Who thought hiring just one member of staff to oversee five powerful wild talents was a good idea? Well, we never really find out anyway.

It's easy to see why Boone was attracted to the comic's 'Demon Bear' storyline as a peg for the movie, but when you replace Sienkiewicz's gorgeously dark artwork with workmanlike direction and so-so special effects, the results feel like short change. It's not that it's bad, just bland. The young cast do well. The blossoming romantic relationship between Dani (Blu Hunt) and Rahne (Maisie Williams, of *Game of Thrones* fame) – something the comic wouldn't have attempted in the Eighties – feels both natural and touching. Anya-Taylor-Joy makes a picture-perfect Ilyana. Charlie Heaton (*Stranger Things*) as Sam Guthrie is a bit too miserable, though, and why Henry Zaga, amiable as he is, was cast as the Afro-Brazilian Roberto is hard to fathom.

David Sutton







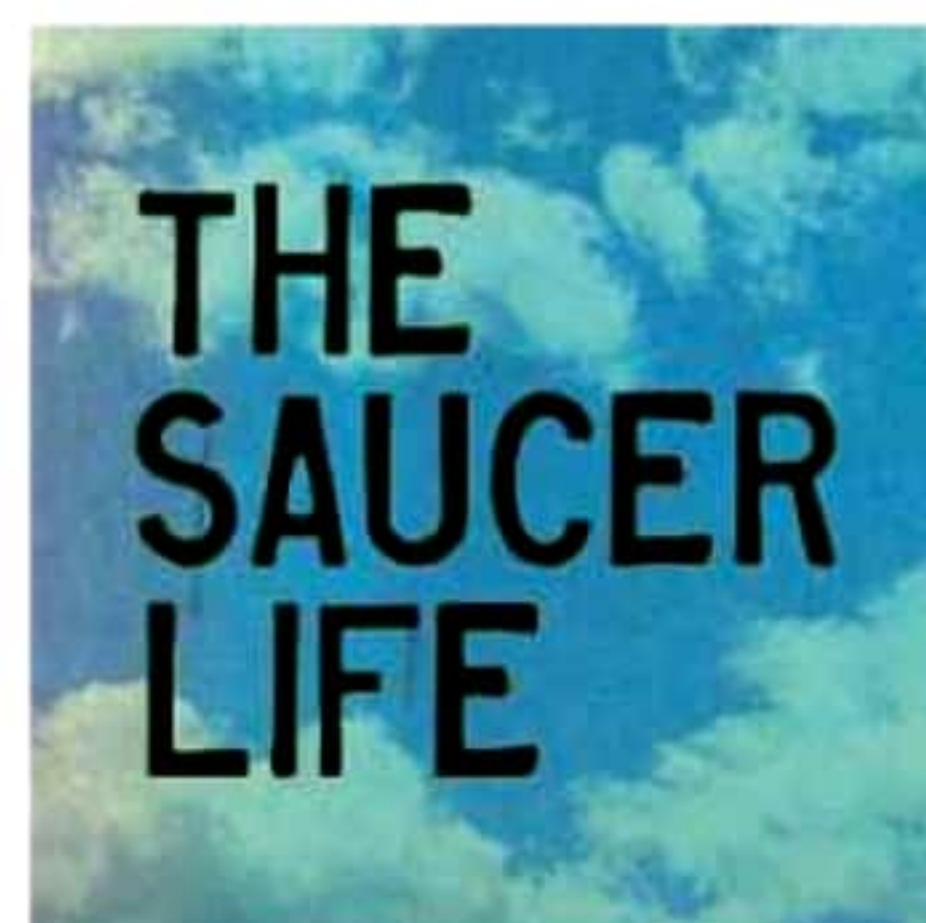
## SOUNDS PECULIAR BRIAN J ROBB ROUNDS UP THE LATEST FORTEAN PODCASTS



### Creepy Cove Community Church

[www.peterlaws.co.uk/creepy-cove](http://www.peterlaws.co.uk/creepy-cove)

Peter Laws, the reverend who reviews horror movies and freaky films in these very pages, has launched his own fortean-focused podcast. *Creepy Cove Community Church* is presented as a horror-themed 'church service' broadcast from an isolated Innsmouth-like fishing village where classic horror movies have moved from reel life to real life. It's a clever conceit, presenting religion mixed with weird themes – but chaptering means the 'actual sermon' bit can be skipped if that's not your bag. It's definitely worth lending an ear to...



### The Saucer Life

<https://saucerlife.com>

*The Saucer Life* aims to "explore the history and lore of flying saucers". Host Aaron Gulyas sets out to chronicle the concepts, events or people orbiting the mystery of UFOs. It's strongly fortean in promising "no belief" and "no debunking". A recent episode explored "The Top 10 Important UFO Books" – note that's 'important', not

'favourite', so Gulyas offers a good recap of some of the classics of ufology literature. Books included are works by Frank Edwards, John A Keel (the inevitable *The Mothman Prophecies*), Whitley Strieber (his 'true story' *Communion*), Gray Barker, John G Fuller (the classic *The Interrupted Journey*), and George Adamski and Desmond Leslie (the ludicrous *The Flying Saucers Have Landed*).

Some of the ideas in these books might seem dated, but they are included for their importance to the field. Other recent instalments of *The Saucer Life* have explored the encounters of Wayne Aho and Otis T Carr, an exploration of Barack Obama as the 'Disclosure President', how a close encounter turned Reinhold T Schmidt to a life of crime, the tale of the mysterious Mitchell Sisters and their 1950s meeting with aliens, and one entitled "The Maury Island Mess". Check it out.

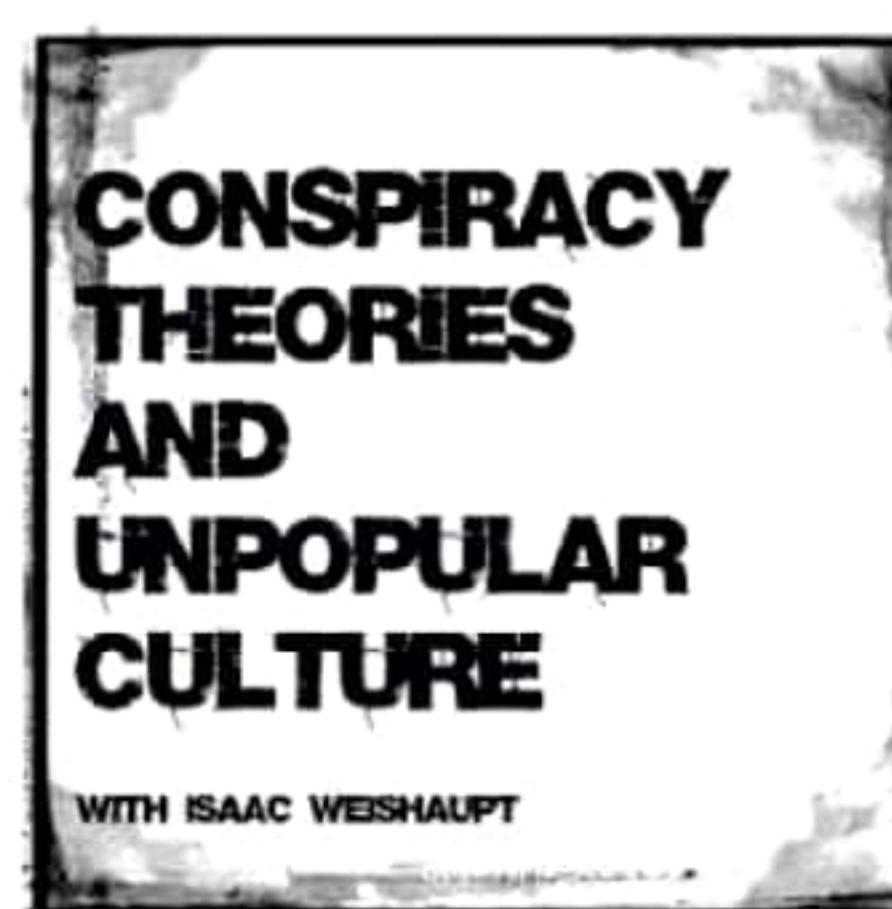


### Monster Talk

<https://monstertalk.skeptical.com>

We've covered *Monster Talk* before, and we're pleased to see that it's still going strong. Although the show is about 'monsters', it explores all forms of that term and attempts to put things in a scientific context. Cryptozoological concerns are central, but other topics occasionally get a look-in. Hosts Blake Smith and Dr Karen Stollznow come at things from their individual perspectives, with Smith

often playing things for laughs (with terribly contrived puns), while Stollznow tends to be a bit more straight. The show often has guests, such as author Adrienne Mayor, who explored the idea of robots and automata in the classical world, Sara Head on Skinwalker Ranch, Jerry Drake on Black Eyed Kids, and Dr Kirsten Sandford exploring questions around aliens and monsters.



### Conspiracy Theories and Unpopular Culture

[www.stitcher.com/podcast/illuminatiwatcher/conspiracy-theories-and-unpopular-culture](http://www.stitcher.com/podcast/illuminatiwatcher/conspiracy-theories-and-unpopular-culture)

Host Isaac Weishaupt (we're sure that's his real name) called his recent episode featuring *American Cosmic* author Dr Diana Pasulka "the most important show we've ever done". It's a wide-ranging interview that covers many fortean bases, and while some of it might need to be taken with a hefty dose of salt, it's certainly entertaining. "This is the culmination of everything," claims Weishaupt, and he's not wrong in that this chat throws every conspiracy theory into a massive sinister soup. Pasulka is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and her interests are wide-ranging, including technology and the supernatural. From the UFO disclosure project to human sacrifices and demons, this instalment has it all. It's a free-wheeling, perhaps slightly unfocused 90 minutes, hitting media manipulation, occultist and rocket scientist Jack Parsons, the history of religion,

Elizabeth I's court astronomer John Dee, UFO crash retrieval sites, the work of Stephen King, simulation theory, and a whole lot more. By the end, Weishaupt admits: "I don't know how to process all this." Neither do we, Isaac, neither do we...



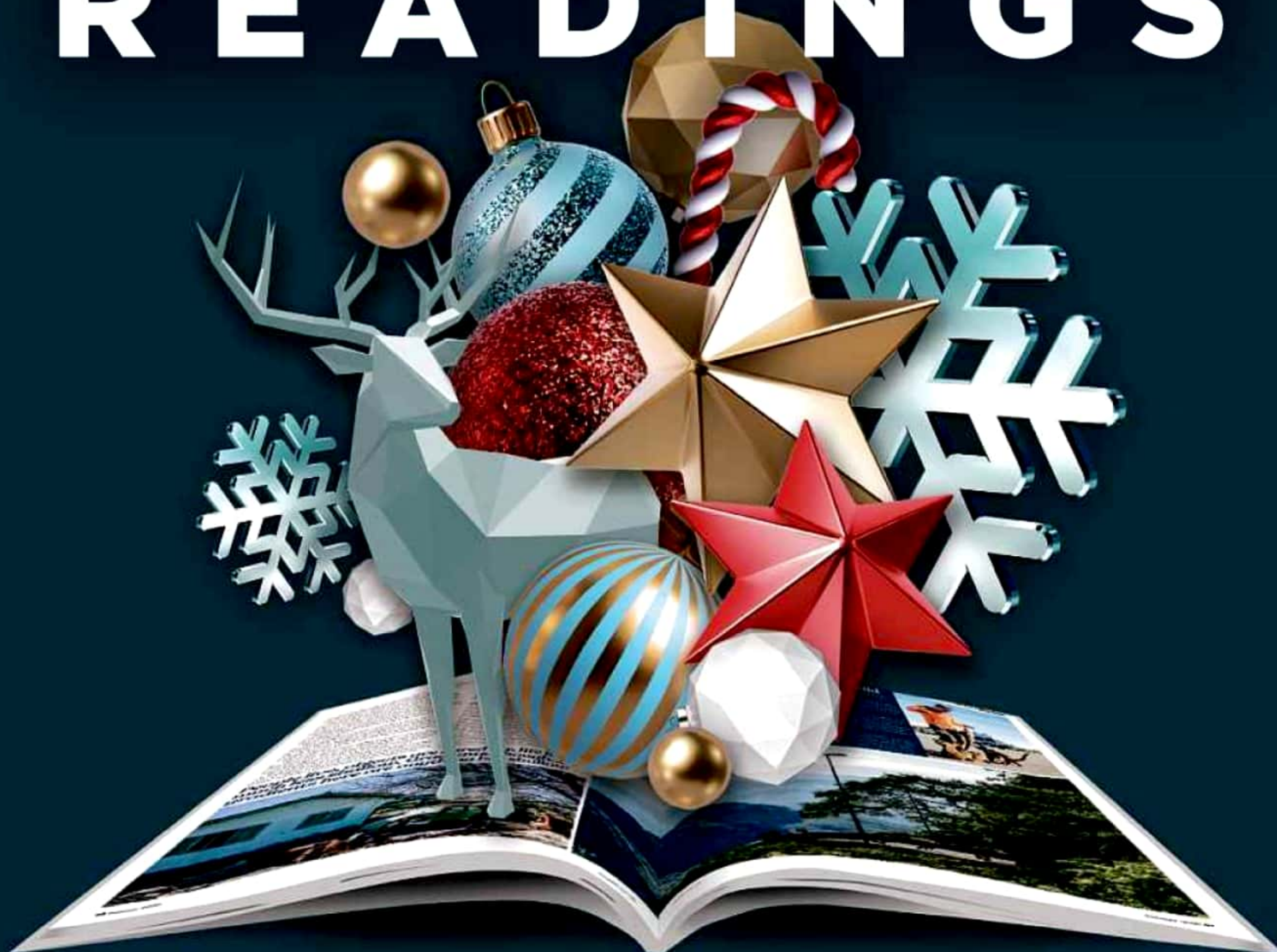
### This Paranormal Life

<https://smarturl.it/ThisParanormalLife>

*This Paranormal Life* is, as the title suggests, a supernatural spoof of NPR's *This American Life*. Hosts Rory Powers and Kit Grier have an easy rapport and set out every week to take an in-depth dive into oddball stories in an attempt to determine whether they are paranormal or not. Similar to *Those Conspiracy Guys* or *Last Podcast on the Left*, *This Paranormal Life* brings a solid dose of humour to the weird. Their exploration of various topics comes with comedy skits recreating key moments. They're scripted, but Rory and Kit are happy to go off-piste when a riff takes over, resulting in them breaking character. A recent episode explored the tale of 1930s musician Robert Johnson, who supposedly sold his soul to the Devil. Other instalments tackle the shadow people who inhabit our dreams, the dark history of a California Toys R Us store, and the case of a flying saucer's alien pilot supposedly buried in the desert in Texas. Unlike the brasher and more raucous *Last Podcast on the Left*, *This Paranormal Life* is relatively family-friendly listening as the worst cuss words are beeped out.



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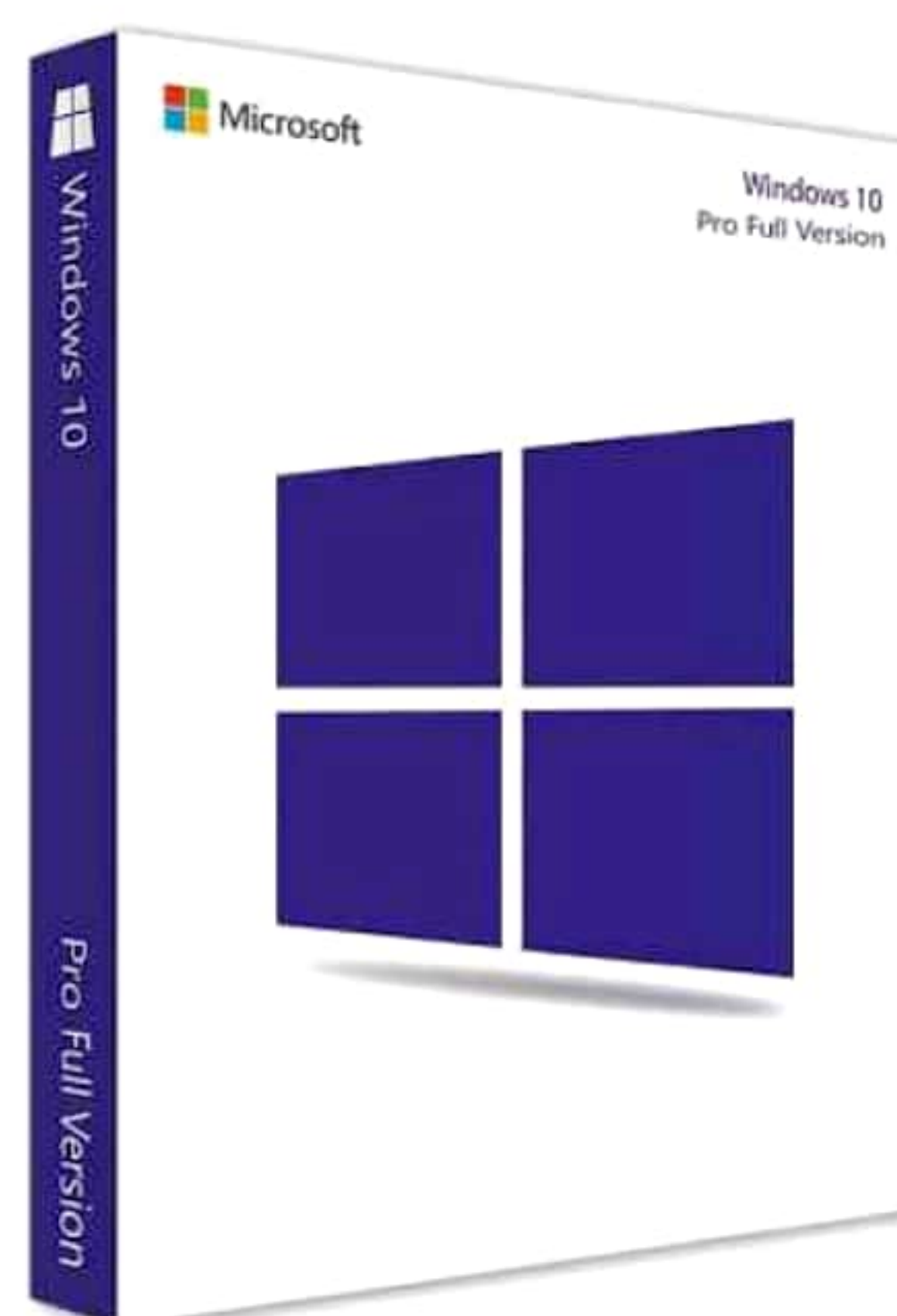


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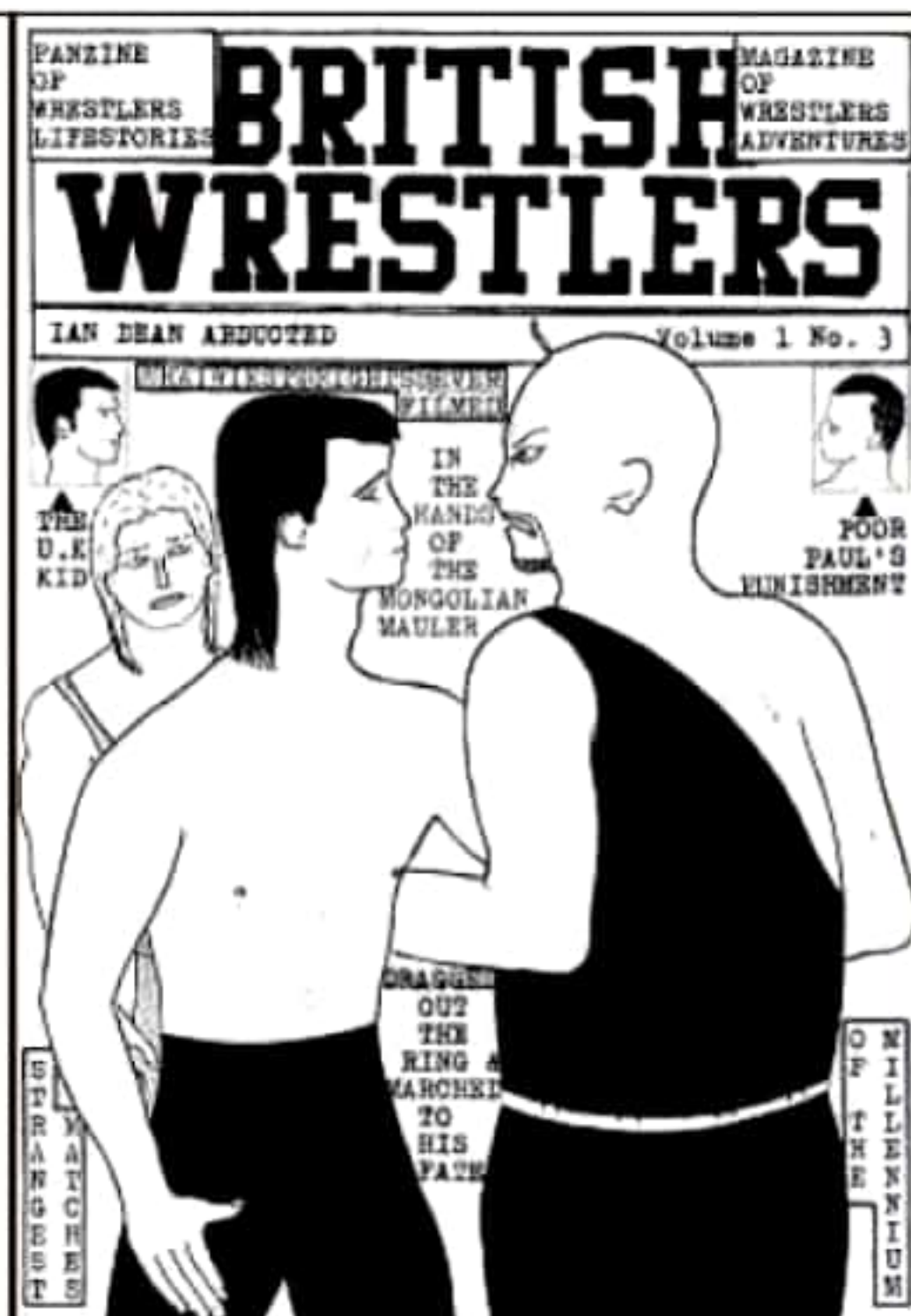
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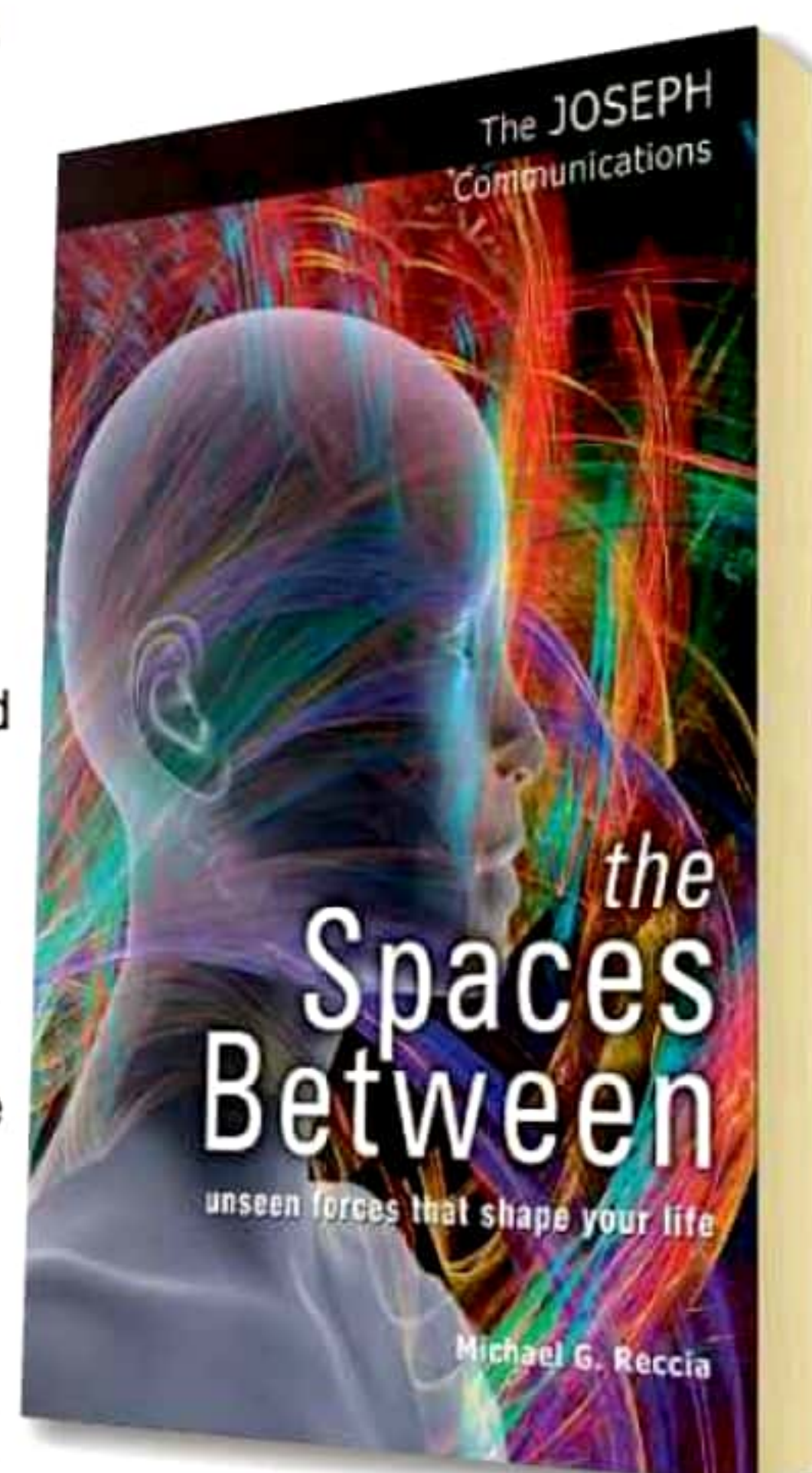
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# LETTERS

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## Wild Irish

The report of an “Irish Wild-man” [FT399:67] is not unusual. Stories about the ‘Wild Irish’ were common in England in the 18th and 19th centuries. LP Curtis’s study, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (and other works) reveal that Irish people were routinely portrayed as subhumans or as animals. During his travels in Ireland, Charles Kingsley wrote to his wife describing the Irish he saw as ‘white chimpanzees’, a sight that he found very disturbing because of their colour.

**Paula McGee**

*Birmingham*

## Hanging, drawing etc

Re: Mythconceptions [FT399:23]: many people believe that our mediæval forebears got the word order wrong in the punishment of being “hanged, drawn and quartered” since victims were, as you say, drawn on a hurdle to the scaffold before being hanged and quartered. The word order is actually correct. The drawing refers to the poor victim having his intestines drawn out of his body before his eyes on a kind of spindle – after being hanged and before being quartered.

**Tony Purcell**

*By email*

## Puzzlement

Spotting Jenny Agutter’s pull-quote used in David V Barrett’s review of ‘Walkabout’ [FT397:64] accidentally pasted into his review of ‘Equus’ [FT399:62], I placed the two pages side by side and enjoyed the comedic effect of the two articles cheerily declaring “It’s very difficult to actually put your finger on what it’s about”. Perhaps the error should be embraced and the quote repeated more widely in the magazine; after all, it could be the ultimate fortean reflection on life.

**Rob Bray**

*Old Stratford, Northamptonshire*

## SIMULACRA CORNER



James Hedges spotted this smoking ghost in a London gutter in the summer of 2019.

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*neous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 66598, London N11 9EN or to [sieveking@forteantimes.com](mailto:sieveking@forteantimes.com).*

## Wooooo

In reference to Mark Greener’s letter, “Cats, dogs and bears” [FT399:50], the suggestion of templates certainly chimed with me. I have long held that the traditional bedsheet ghost of folklore – still clinging on despite being so at odds with anecdotal accounts – resembles an owl in flight, possibly of the barn or snowy variety. Perhaps the image is hardwired into us from our ancient, small and furry ancestry, reflecting something we once faced on a nightly basis? Even the call is similar. If we assume that the fast metabolisms of our ancestors resulted in accelerated processing of sensory information, the “Oooo” of an owl as experienced by its prey would come very close to the deeper, slower “Wooooo” of the spook!

**Barry Metcalfe**

*By email*

## EVP & bird watching

If Friedrich Jurgenson was recording birdsong at the time, his “Friedel, Friedel” EVP [FT399:17] could have been a call of the Great Tit, transliterated as “Teacher, teacher”. Sticking with ornithology, the “Penguin on the roof” [FT399:27] is, in my opinion, a somewhat out-of-place member of the auk family, the Razorbill. And as a verse translator I like the idea of a “hexameter cat” (*Parsons Daily* clipping, 7 Dec 1898, FT399:34).

**Richard George**

*St Albans, Hertfordshire*

## Giordano Bruno

Loved Kevin Jackson & Hunt Emerson’s ‘Lives of the Great Occultists’ [FT397:50-53], but felt it was a bit simplistic to say that the Roman Church burned Giordano Bruno at the stake for saying

the Earth went round the Sun. The real reason was his denial of various Catholic doctrines, such as transubstantiation, the Trinity, and Christ’s divinity. He also had a thing about reincarnation. None of which should have led to the flames, for sure, but if he was a martyr then it wasn’t of science. Perhaps more of freedom of thought.

**Bob Johnston**

*Glasgow*

## Shaken and a bit stirred

I am an online bookseller. On the weekend the death of Sean Connery was announced [31 Oct/1 Nov 2020] I received two orders: one from Maria Bond in Dumfries, the other from Miss G L Bond of Bristol.

**Mark Howard**

*By email*





## Ancient and modern

This summer we spent a couple of days holidaying in Blairgowrie. This part of Perthshire is awash with megalithic stones, some recumbent, some standing. During an evening stroll on a hilly wooded area, I noticed a small megalithic stone circle fenced off beside a farm, with what

appeared to be an adjacent mobile phone mast. My inner Nigel Kneale went haywire, contrasting a modern communication transmitter with stones the ancients used to communicate with the cosmos. It crossed my mind that the circle could be faked, but then I spotted a solitary megalith among the trees nearby.

**Colin Muir**, Falkirk, Scotland

## Everlasting fire

The review of *Heaven and Hell – a History of the Afterlife* [FT399:5], states that Jesus believed that “the unsaved are not tortured forever in Hell but are annihilated” – and simply cease to exist. This is a rather curious conclusion, given Jesus’s numerous statements on Hell in the Gospels, including: “Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.” (Matthew 18:8)

“Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:41)

There are many more such biblical verses.

**Dr Peter J Griffiths**

*By email*

## The Longest Word

May I point Barry Baldwin to a word longer than the Greek one he mentions [FT398:19]? Mrs Byrne’s *Dictionary of Unusual, Obscure and Preposterous Words* (Granada 1974) has a word starting methionyl... which is 1913 letters long. Admittedly it is a chemical name for an enzyme. There is also a YouTube video of this word – taking nearly three minutes to read out.

**Ken Austin**

*By email*

## Rebibia escapees

I see from <www.macaubusiness.com/police-nab-italy-prison-escapees-who-promised-to-return/> that the escapees from Italy’s Rebibia prison [FT397:9] who left a note promising to return were recaptured in Tuscany. The article, dated 18 June, states they escaped on the 2nd, and were recaptured the day before, 17 June, exactly 15

days since their escape. I wonder if they completed their business, and if in fact they were recaptured, rather than deliberately getting themselves caught, to politely return to their considerable sentences just as their note promised. (The article says they were in till 2029.) Would make a great movie.

**Dean Teasdale**

*Gateshead, Tyne & Wear*

## Sweet Mystery of Lyfe

In his article on alternative life forms [FT398:16], David Hambling introduces the work of Bartlett and Wong, two scientists who are considering the possibility of non-carbon-based life, which they hypothesise as ‘lyfe’. While a variety of chemical and even mechanical formulations are mentioned, the central problem of what might be considered to be ‘living’ lies not in some distant galaxy, but right here on Earth:

it is the nature and limitations of language itself. To start, we can consider the idea of imagining different life forms as a thought experiment, and at first all is well. A creative brainstorming session may throw up amazing possibilities that no one had thought of before, but no amount of brainstorming can envisage something that lies outside of human language and experience – which is exactly the situation that might be found on an alien planet. There is also the ‘simple’ problem of defining something. On what authority is the definition based? Is the defined object deemed to be named correctly because it matches its definition, or does the definition obtain its veracity from the object?

Nietzsche was ahead of the game here when suggesting that we name things, not to establish some essential truth about them, but purely to make them comprehensible to ourselves for our own purposes, and he even wondered how a mosquito would name the components of the world based on its own needs. Heidegger was later to discuss the nature of the ‘true’ coin and the ‘false’ coin: both are real, physical objects that may look identical, but are defined differently. While we can compare one coin with another, how can we establish which of their definitions holds the high ground? In short, what authority is to be used to differentiate one set of words from another set of words, and whence does that authority get its authority? This echoes much current debate on this planet as to what constitutes a ‘real’ man or a ‘real’ woman, where many claims are based on subjective linguistic descriptions that omit the supporting veracity that is present in such assertions as the Earth being a sphere, etc. Such conundrums are not made any easier by shifting them into another galaxy.

While I applaud the efforts of Bartlett and Wong to extend the boundaries of scientific definitions, I think further linguistic problems await them, and am also puzzled as to why they wish lyfe to be pronounced loif. To my ear this has a good Irish ring to it, so why not go the whole hog and



suggest Liffey. For James Joyce this river symbolised the stream of life and language in which we swim, and from which Dublin's most famous product was brewed. Of course, there's many there who would claim that only in Dublin can you get a real pint of Guinness...

**Mike Harding**  
London

Regarding "Lyfe, but not as we know it..." – sometime last year (I think it was), I watched a 'Sky At Night' discussion on landing space probes on Mars. It seems that there is a consensus that space probes should not land in a certain part of Mars, a rather large area on both sides of the equatorial line. This was because of the possibility of contamination carried on the space probes from Earth being deposited on the Martian surface, and if there was Martian microbial life then unforeseen problems could occur. I found it amusing that probes sent to find life on Mars were not supposed to land in the area where life had a good chance of existing. The reporter was rather peeved about this.

**James Wilkins**  
Southampton

## Triple dicks

FT seems to be going in a lot for coincidences lately. The latest example: there is a report of a boy with three penises [FT398:11], and Barry Baldwin's review of Artemidorus's *Interpretation of Dreams* highlights a slave's dream of growing three penises [FT398:62]. Charles Fort would have some comment, surely.

**Martin Jenkins**  
London

## Ancient astronauts

While Peter Brookesmith's Flying Sorcery column forms a strong counter-balance to some of the more extreme – erm – interpretations within 'ufology', I believe that in his last column [FT397:30], he committed what was, in fortune terms, something of a cardinal sin by dismissing "ancient astronaut" theorising as "nasty racist crap". Is this

area of speculation now to be designated simply as "nasty" and "racist"? Should this line of enquiry be shut down? Is any data related to the question now to be (shudder) damned? I'd always considered any questioning of "who really built the pyramids" to be more related to the area of catastrophism than to national identity, even when the suggestion is that it was ET.

Undoubtedly, there are lines of enquiry into the building of ancient megalithic structures that can be motivated by racist impulses (conscious or unconscious) and any new data unearthed can be press-ganged into the service of racist ideologies. But the same can also be said of the investigation into many branches of religion, philosophy, science (don't even start on genetics), arts, sociology, psychology, history, etc – and assuredly, many other areas of 'fortune' (Nordic aliens, Rundfleugzeug's, Priory of Sion, anyone?).

When shrill voices on social media call for the cancelling of 'Ancient Aliens' on the History channel (as I have noticed once or twice in the last few months), I can disregard them. Yes, the series is a bit crap, there are certainly some very dubious voices on it and that guy's haircut tells you everything you need to know about his relationship with objectivity. I've seen the programme, I don't watch it, but I certainly don't want to see it – or its ilk – cancelled for being "racist". This is because they serve to inspire 'what if' thinking – just as Brookesmith's *The Unexplained* partwork did for me when I was younger. Despite all the evidence to the contrary (that we are actively presented with daily), I don't think that most people are actually stupid. The stupid are just the tall poppies on social media, desperate for thumbs and 'upvotes' and full of passionate intensity.

I get why Brookesmith may have fallen prey to this kind of thinking. We live in times of great polarisation. There seems to be enormous pressure on everybody (especially those in print media) to declare what they stand for and what they are against. Eve-

rything is zero sum. I often thank Fort then, that fortune is usually able to remain comfortable with the cognitive dissonance of the age, without feeling the need to form a hasty conclusion simply to end the mental discomfort.

**Kris Hall**  
London

## Ufologist confusion

In FT397:73 (Oct 2020) E Bailey calls me out for mistaking the Lacombe character in Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as based on Hynek and not Vallee [FT394:64]. [The letter in question was actually by Martin Stubbs, not E Bailey. This was an editorial error.] In fact, the Hynek-based character I had in mind is David Laughlin, Lacombe's interpreter and assistant, an American cartographer as opposed to an American astronomer. Indeed, the Lacombe-as-Vallee identification is somewhat disputed, with some involved in the film believing that the character is based on French UFO researcher Aimé Michel and not Vallee, while others believe the Lacombe character to be a composite of the two.

**Eric Hoffman**  
Vernon, Connecticut

## Vaccination doubts

The *Daily Telegraph* report about vaccines quoted in 'Vaccine fears' [FT399:6] shows a certain level of complacency. The journalist shoves in the usual response to lateral thinking by referencing the more alarming objections to mass vaccination, moving quickly to an implication of irrational paranoia and wacky conspiracy theories.

However, there is medical evidence that not only are some vaccines ineffective but occasionally dangerous. In the 1990s, a rotavirus vaccine manufactured by Wyeth was withdrawn from sale because it was linked to increased bowel obstruction in infants. In 1955 the US government's vaccine

against polio failed to fully inactivate the virus before it was given to 200,000 children. 4,000 of the vaccinated children contracted polio, 200 were paralysed and 10 died.

In 1976 epidemiologists wrongly predicted an H1N1 swine flu pandemic and convinced President Ford to vaccinate the entire US population. 40 million were vaccinated before everyone realised there was no swine flu. The vaccine was linked to a number of cases of Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a rare neurological condition. This vaccine fiasco did no favours for Ford on his next election day. There are many legitimate doubts, substantiated by peer-reviewed scientific papers and by court decisions, about the legitimacy and efficacy of mass public health interventions, such as vaccinations. The lobbying of pharmaceutical conglomerates and their record of medical malfeasance are also in the public record.

**David Stokes**  
By email

## Dream Demon – and Martians

I am very grateful to Revd. Laws for reviewing *Dream Demon* [FT394:67]. I have never seen it, but I do have a fairly vivid memory of the trailer for it airing back in the Eighties. I have for years been niggled by my inability to pin down the identity of the film to which the trailer related. Having seen it again on



PAUL TAYLOR



# LETTERS

YouTube, I came to realise that I had failed to find it because I was absolutely certain that the trailer made explicit reference to Wes Craven. It does not. Mandela Effect again?

Regarding Martin Jenkins's letter [FT394:71] on the difficulty of extraterrestrial bugs afflicting life forms with terrestrial DNA, I believe the idea is that both earthly life and the alien bugs may have an extraterrestrial origin, and therefore comparable genomes. Also, HG Wells's Martians could derive nutrition from earthly biomass as long as they had similar amino acid constituents, an adaptable digestive process – and we didn't happen to be poisonous to them. Similarly, while earthly parasites probably couldn't threaten them, in the absence of an immune system they might be easy prey for fungi and other saprotropes.

**Ian l'Anson**

*By email*

I'm afraid I don't share Martin Jenkins's confidence that vampiric Martians would be unable to draw any sustenance from human blood – our blood contains all sorts of other potentially nutritious elements aside from the DNA he mentions. Chemistry is fairly consistent across most of the observable Universe, not to mention the possibility of panspermia (oops), so I suspect there really would be something of value for aliens to extract. Of course, the possibility remains they just really like the taste, and HG Wells's invasion is more of a trip to the ice cream parlour than a matter of sustenance.

**Ryan Shirlow**

*Leeds, West Yorkshire*

## Hellcats

I think Baba the cat should check her sources. I am afraid I don't agree with quite a lot of her feature about the alleged 'Demonisation of the Domestic Feline' [FT399:30-35]. For instance, during the Hellenic period in Egypt, cats might have been venerated, but they were



also systematically bred and killed as sacrifices. Some of the cat mummies discovered were young cats of less than two years old that had been strangled. Others show injuries suggesting they had been beaten to death. The arrival of Christianity might well have come as a relief to Egyptian felines if it stopped this particular form of veneration.

Cats trot through illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages pottering about the kitchen, sitting quietly in corners, playing the bagpipes... Their actual paw marks (and worse) appear on manuscript pages. In Deventer, around 1420 a scribe explained an empty page and an ominous stain on the book he was working on with the little message: "Here is nothing missing, but a cat urinated on this during a certain night. Cursed be the pesty cat that urinated over this book during the night in Deventer and because of it many others [other cats] too. And beware well not to leave open books at night

where cats can come." <<https://io9.gizmodo.com/this-medieval-manuscript-curses-the-cat-who-peed-on-it-1502884468>>

No indication that it was doing Satan's work, just that it was being a cat, and a useful cat, because he and his friends were keeping down the vermin who would nibble the precious manuscripts. Just take care to shut the books at night. And the Irish monk who wrote a poem to his pet cat, Pangur Ban, around the ninth century, obviously felt nothing but love for the little beast. Cats were actually quite popular with Christians. They were often the favourite pets both of nuns (whole convents full of crazy cat ladies...) and recommended to the solitary anchoresses. There just does not seem to be support for the idea that the arrival of Christianity meant a sudden outbreak of cat-hatred.

Yes, there seems to have been a folk belief that a cat might steal the souls of the dead, but it was certainly not part of

the Church's teaching. It seems to have existed in Celtic fairy lore in the Highlands of Scotland and occasionally in Ireland. The culprit was not the average moggy but the Cat Sith, a large black cat that could change into a witch (or possibly vice versa), but had to stay a cat after the ninth change. Various ploys were used to keep it from stealing the soul of the deceased at funerals, which included playing games to distract it, watching by the body to keep all cats away and not lighting a fire in the room where the corpse was waked so the cat was not attracted by the warmth.

Now this sounds like common sense advice – keeping the room where the dead person lay as cool as possible had obvious advantages, as did guarding the corpse from cats of any kind. And it sounded much nicer to blame possible mischief from fairy cat, than to say that not lighting a fire was to stop the body decaying too quickly, and starting to smell, or that keeping out the cats was not to prevent soul stealing, but possible corpse nibbling.

But this sensible advice from the Scottish Highlands was not codified as doctrine in the 13th century by Pope Gregory IX – and if he ever did denounce cats as "vessels of the Devil and enemies of God" there is no record of it. What he did do was write a decretal (a letter authorising changes in Canon Law) called *Vox in Rama* in June 1223, which did not describe cats as creatures of the Devil, or tell the faithful to kill them. What it did was to warn various people of authority in the Mainz area of a Satanic cult that had allegedly been discovered by Konrad von Marburg. (Not everyone agreed with him, some to the extent that they assassinated him shortly after he reported his findings).

According to Konrad, the cult had an initiation ceremony in which the novice was introduced to a large frog or toad, which the other initiates kissed. It was said to sometimes appear unnaturally big, as large as a goose or





duck, sometimes the size of an oven (it is tempting to wonder if it was related to the very large, though not oven-sized, Colorado River Toad, or the huge Cane Toad, both of which exude a hallucinogenic substance through their skin that the worshippers would absorb by kissing the creature, and might account for their later alleged experiences. Sadly, these toads are not native to Europe.) After the toad, the novice met a black-eyed man, so thin as to appear to be a skin-covered skeleton, whom he kissed, upon which he became as cold as ice and forgot his Catholic faith.

It is interesting that no one, as far as I know, has ever accused Pope Gregory of condemning giant frogs or emaciated men as 'vessels of the Devil'. But the initiation was followed by a meal, after which a statue of a black cat came to life and approached the congregation with its tail raised so that everyone could kiss its bottom. Then they blew out the candles and had an orgy, where a shining man with furry cat legs appeared. So the cat has turned up at last. But it is not singled out for any special commination. It's just there, along with the giant frog. And nowhere is Pope Gregory recorded as ordering cat-slaughter – which makes sense really, because the creature was evidently not an ordinary cat. Smashing statues of cats just in case they came to life at orgies would have made more sense, but he didn't recommend that either.

Also the celebrants were not witches; according to Konrad, they were heretics. Witches were not, in 1223, considered much of a problem. Nor were they then, or later, seriously thought to be particularly connected with cats. Later, during the time of the witch-hunts in the 16th or 17th centuries, not all witches were believed to have demon familiars in any kind of shape; these were best known in England, while the elaborate ceremonies of the Witch's Sabbath were best known on the Continent. Where accused witches were alleged

to have familiars, they were as likely to be toads, dogs, ferrets or unnatural creatures of no known species. And in England witches were as, if not more, likely to transform into hares as cats. And no one has so far claimed that any Pope anathematised hares.

But according to Baba the cat (as transcribed by Paul Koudounaris): "In 1484... the Vatican proclaimed us [cats] to be as culpable for the evils of sorcery as the witches themselves and decreed that we should be burned alongside them". But how and where was this proclamation made? Certainly on 5 December 1484 Pope Innocent VIII issued a Papal Bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, which recognised the existence of witchcraft and urged the authorities in Germany to assist the officials of the Inquisition to assist in rooting it out.

It was written at the request of Heinrich Kramer, one of these officials, who wasn't getting the support he felt he should have done from the authorities. He didn't get it after the Bull either, and retired in disgust to write the appalling *Malleus Maleficarum* ['Hammer of Witches'], which, by the way, was formally condemned by the Church three years after its publication, and actually didn't have a lot to say about cats. The text of the Bull is available in translation here <[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Summis\\_desiderantes](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Summis_desiderantes)>. As any reader will see, while it acknowledges the existence of witches, it says nothing about burning them, and nothing about cats either. It's not the only interesting addition that someone has added to that Bull. In my web searches I came across the remarkable statement on a website about cannabis that the Bull also "labelled cannabis as an unholy sacrament of the satanic mass and issued a papal ban on cannabis medicines." <<https://magazine.hempshopper.com/en/component/content/article/141-hemp-history/hemp-history-ce/112-1484>>

Fascinating. And again, as

anyone can see from the text of the Bull, utterly untrue – although interesting in view of the fact that Vin Mariani (a tonic wine which gained its tonic effect from coca leaves) was later endorsed by Leo XIII and drunk by St Pius X... An even more startling statement on the website <<https://www.thevintagenews.com/2019/04/02/the-vatican-and-cats/>> declares: "The pope actually ordered cats officially excommunicated" – this Pope, though not identified, is probably Innocent VIII. Now, excommunication means being excluded from participating in the sacraments and services of the Church... which would mean the Pope ordered that cats could no longer be baptised, receive communion or marry, which they certainly hadn't been able to do before 1484, making this is even more ridiculous than the alleged ban on cannabis.

Now I am not saying that heretic hunting was right, or that grown up men should have paid any attention to the horror stories of Konrad von Marburg, who had clearly either invented the account of the Satanic initiation, or had serious mental problems. Nor that cats, like many other animals, were not sometimes badly treated throughout history. Our own times are not innocent. Dog fighting, cock fighting and even badger baiting are not unknown. But Pope Gregory IX did not declare war on cats in the name of the Church; and cats in popular art and stories are far more likely to be associated with witchcraft today than they were in 1223 or 1484.

**Tina Rath**  
By email

## Man's best friend

Paul Koudounaris's claim that cats have been human companions longer than dogs [FT399:30-35] is quite wrong. The domestication of the cat began about 6,000 years ago. The domestication of the dog began at least 14,200 years ago and possibly as long as 40,000 years ago. Indeed, it has been suggested that if the

latter date is correct then dogs may have given modern man an advantage over the stronger, better adapted Neanderthals. Dogs also have much larger brains than cats in proportion to body size and have more than twice the number of neurones that deal with intelligence.

**Richard Freeman**  
Exeter, Devon

## Receptive mind set

It struck me that the Little People mentioned in Michael J Hallowell's *Invizikids* [FT393:52-53] and in Peter Stanford's *Angels, a visible and an invisible history* [FT393:59] might be related. Even Paul Devereux's little green man [FT393:55] might come into the picture. What I see is poltergeist energy as mental power and Tibetan tulpas in the form of imaginary friends formed by children – Gef is a good example of this [FT269:32,40, 353:34-39] – and by pregnant women as in Bronwen Pugh's case (an event interpreted through the lens of her Christian beliefs). An American Indian guru of my wife's acquaintance told her that pregnant women were believed by his people to be more open to psychic events. In the context of UFOs, it is also believed that driving long distances, especially at night on lonely roads, can lead to a self-hypnotic state.

Perhaps in our busy world we have lost sight of this ability; more laid back as well as ancient communities were more aware of such entities – and perhaps accepting of them – than our materialistic age. Science may be investigating them now – a step up from our witch-hunting days – but do such phenomena only come into being in a more open environment? Scepticism acts like a hammer on a snail shell or clumsy fingers on a gas mantel, destroying the peaceful situation needed for them to manifest, as in séance rooms or silent retreats.

**Tony Sandy**  
By email



# It Happened to Me...

## Premature arrival

It was Autumn 1986. I was in my mid-20s, late to leave the nest, living with my widowed father until I was in my mid-30s. We were more like flat-mates than father and son. My elder brother Paul, meanwhile, had flown the nest back in 1980 when he married Sara, a girl he'd met at work (all names have been changed). Sara's family was originally from Jamaica – so it was, in those days, what was termed a “mixed marriage”. They'd had their first baby, Jamie, in the summer of 1986 and Dad was thrilled at having his first grandson.

One Sunday morning, after a few beers out with my mates on the Saturday night, I emerged from the pit in need of tea, biscuits and paracetamol. I went into the bathroom, which overlooked our front drive, and attended to my ablutions. As I flushed, I glanced out of the bathroom window and, through the frosted pane I saw a car pulled up on our drive behind Dad's Astra. My brother at the time drove a Volvo, the huge car necessary to carry the new baby, pushchairs, high chairs, nappies, bottle-warmers and the like. This particular model was a shade of brown on the excrement colour spectrum. Before rinsing my hands, I saw the unmistakable brown car parked, my brother getting out of the front seat and my sister-in-law reaching into the back, car doors wide open, evidently getting Jamie out of his baby-seat. I headed downstairs, calling to Dad that we had visitors. I heard him in the back room quickly put down his Sunday paper and urgently asking who it was, as he was very house-proud and never wanted visitors to see the place in a mess – not that it ever was.

“It's Paul and Sara with Jamie,” I replied reaching the bottom of the stairs, no more than 30 seconds after I'd seen them from the bathroom. I



looked out of the hall window to wave – but there was no one there. As I heard Dad quickly tidying up, I unlocked and unbolted the front door and looked out onto the drive. There was no car, no sign of my brother or his family, and no sign that they'd driven off. Just a quiet suburban, Sunday morning, barely a soul in sight.

“Where are they then?” asked Dad when I joined him in the back room as he plumped up the cushions. I didn't know what to say.

“They're not there,” I replied uncertainly.

“What do you mean, ‘They're not there’?” replied my father, clearly thinking I was still drunk from the night before (as does everyone I've related this story to).

“Just that – there's no one there. I must have been mistaken, I guess.” I sat down, confused, while Dad returned to his paper.

Ten minutes later, we both heard a car outside. I stood up and went and opened the

front door. On the drive was my brother's distinctive brown Volvo. He was getting out of the front seat, my sister-in-law was opening the back doors, getting the baby out, all doors wide open.

Even before greetings were exchanged, I asked my brother, “Did you arrive about 10 minutes ago then drive off?” He looked at me quizzically, as Dad had. “No, we just got here.”

Everyone says I was still suffering the effects of the beer from the night before, but this is exactly what happened.

**Martin Downham**  
Epsom, Surrey

Editor's note: A *Fylgja* is an Icelandic ghost of presage, a spirit that precedes the actual arrival of someone, and is mistaken for him or her. In Norway such a figure is called a *Vardøgr*. In his book *Real Ghosts, Restless Spirits and Haunted Minds*, Brad Steiger writes: “The *Vardøgr* is a kind of spiritual projection which its possessor unconsciously em-

plays to announce his physical arrival.” Over the years, FT has published several first-hand accounts of this phenomenon. See, for instance, **FT101:51, 104:52, 371:77**, and Nils Erik Grande's article “Harbinger Ghosts”, **FT327:30-33**.

## Lido haunting?

My partner is a level-headed young woman. She went to Tooting Bec Common on 29 October [2020], heading for the lido. While walking across the vast open space, she couldn't shake off the feeling that she was being watched, even though there was no one around. The atmosphere was still and subdued. All the birds stopped singing simultaneously when she reached the lido. When she got into the water she could still sense that someone or something was observing her from close by. After swimming a few lengths, she noticed a figure in black – like a shadow only darker – standing at the fence looking directly at her. It had no features. She estimated it was about 6ft [1.8m] tall. Sensing it was malevolent, she remained in the water, eventually plucking up the courage to scream at it to f\*\*\* off – which it did. She remained in the water for two hours, afraid to get out and walk across the common. Luckily for her, the water was heated. When she eventually got out, she still noticed the subdued atmosphere and the eerie silence.

She now refuses to go to that lido alone. I believe that she may have seen a ‘shadow person’. Has anyone else had such an encounter in this part of SW London?

**Phil Brand**  
London

Editor's note: FT correspondents have described encounters with such ‘shadow people’. See **FT274:76** and **FT335:72-73**. See also ‘They came from the shadows’ by Nick Parkins, **FT335:54-55**.



# Everybody's IN A LATHER *about Friendly Soap*



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# ARMCHAIR Fortean Traveller



## 124. Virtual voyages

Don't let lockdowns stop you from exploring some of the world's strangest places says **LISA GLEDHILL** as she offers her top tips for online exploration and shares some of her favourite virtual destinations.

Travel restrictions, lockdowns and short, cold winter days have kept many an adventurous fortéan housebound these last couple of months. Even though there is hope of release on the horizon, a return to the pre-pandemic days of carefree travel is still some way off. So what's a curious mind with itchy feet to do, to while away the long, dark evenings? Well thankfully, plenty of fascinating and strange places – and even some alternative realities – are available to explore online. Lately I've been popping into Rosslyn Chapel at lunchtime, followed by dinner on the Giza plateau – and there's still time for a trip to outer space with a mug of Horlicks before bed...

### ANCIENT TEMPLES

I love a good ruin, and they don't come much more laden with mystical baggage than

Stonehenge. Was it erected by Merlin, aliens, or stone-age people with a space-age grasp of astronomy? In the immortal words of Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnell: "No one knows who they were or what they were doing..." but you can explore their legacy via a live webcam slap-bang in the middle of the circle at ([www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/stonehenge360/](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/stonehenge360/)). And at ([www.stonehengeskyline.co.uk/](http://www.stonehengeskyline.co.uk/)) you can get more information in a self-directed virtual tour, plus some nifty astronomical overlays.

The pyramids and Sphinx of Egypt's Giza plateau are the focus of at least as many freewheeling theories as Stonehenge. In normal times, the site is easy enough to visit but getting inside the Great Pyramid itself

can be trickier. Luckily there's a good 360° video on Youtube ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMzouTzim0o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMzouTzim0o)) Harvard University's Giza project provides navigable 3D models of the monuments and temples in their heyday (<http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/>) and you can take a walk around the whole plateau as it is today via Google Streetview ([www.google.co.uk/maps/about/behind-the-scenes/streetview/treks/pyramids-of-giza/](http://www.google.co.uk/maps/about/behind-the-scenes/streetview/treks/pyramids-of-giza/)).

Of course, after the ancient aliens had finished in Egypt they popped over to the Americas to knock up a few more pyramids – this time with a funky stepped silhouette. There are lots of tourist-made 360° videos of these on YouTube, some good and some less so. A website called [www.airpano.com](http://www.airpano.com) has high quality aerial 360° views of many sites,

but the best in my opinion is their view over the Nazca lines of Peru.

A lesser-known place but one of my personal favourites is the hidden subterranean temple of Hal Saflieni in Malta (FT168:50-51). Known as the Hypogeum, it's an atmospheric gateway to the mindscape of our prehistoric ancestors. In real life, visitor numbers are controlled to preserve the red ochre wall-paintings, but Google has an informative photo tour (<https://tinyurl.com/yx9lsp23>) and best of all, a self-guided 360° walk-through (<https://tinyurl.com/yxw68a5r>).

### CRYPTOZOLOGY

Cryptozoologists have a tough time. They can spend their entire lives researching, with barely a footprint or a tuft of hair to show for it. The growth in live-streams and camera-traps ought to make surveillance easier (or at least less cold and wet) but you still need to be lucky to be in the right place at the right time. A well-established web cam at Loch Ness has captured a few suggestive ripples over the last few years ([www.lochness.co.uk/livecam.html](http://www.lochness.co.uk/livecam.html)), although at the time of writing, it was showing photos updated every few seconds rather than live video, due to technical issues.

For cryptids like Yetis and Sasquatches, which roam much larger areas, a dedicated livestream isn't really an option, but there's just a chance you might spot something on one of the many live weather-cams posted in mountainous parts of the world. In fact, some claim that a Bigfoot has already been caught on a traffic-cam in Washington State: (<https://globalnews.ca/news/6456218/bigfoot-traffic-camera/>).

Lots of the world's bigger museums now have very sophisticated ways of making their collections available to digital visitors. The Australian Museum has a fascinating natural history collection (<https://australian.museum/learn/collections/>) that's easy to explore online, and the section on thylacines is full of



ABOVE: Stonehenge was even closed to Druids in 2020 – but you can still explore the site online.





TOP LEFT: California's Winchester House. ABOVE LEFT: A small winged humanoid in the Merrylin Cryptid Museum. ABOVE RIGHT: A haunted doll in the Museum of Shadows.

information, photographs and even a rotatable 3D thylacine skeleton. Some might argue that this shouldn't be part of the "Extinct Animals" section, but as it is I ended up discovering more fascinating stuff about dead antipodean megafauna along the way.

Sometimes cryptozoology wanders into the liminal territory between consensus reality and folklore and that's why my final recommendation in this category is a museum so cryptic it may not even have a physical existence. At [www.merrylinmuseum.com/](http://www.merrylinmuseum.com/) you will find dozens of preserved specimens of fairies, dragons and chthonic horrors, all beautifully photographed and carefully described (FT283:48-50). There are no fancy 360 walk-throughs and the museum is not open to visitors, but you can spend hours wandering among the display cases of the imagination, studying this collection of relics from the world of stories.

### GHOSTS & PARAPSYCHOLOGY

For serious students of the paranormal, you can't beat the Society for Psychical Research. Their programme of talks and conferences is now being delivered via zoom and their

## The section on thylacines is full of information and photos

website ([www.spr.ac.uk](http://www.spr.ac.uk)) contains decades-worth of research materials to pore over.

For those of us just looking for a bit of spooky fun, a ghost walk is a good option, and pretty much all the towns and cities which usually offer these events have an online version. It's a crowded field, so the best way to find something you like the look of is to search for the place of your choice plus "ghost walk" on either Facebook or YouTube. You'll find recordings of previous walks and notifications of upcoming live walks – some are amateurish, some are slickly professional and some charge a fee. The choice is yours; but as with the real-world events, there's no guarantee the spooks will show up.

A favourite forteen curiosity, The Winchester Mystery House (FT166:50), offers a good self-guided tour of some of its labyrinthine rooms and corridors – though as this is

pre-recorded, you're unlikely to spot one of the legendary ghosts. It's not free, but if you can't travel to California, this could be a cost-effective way to explore a unique building ([www.winchestermysteryhouse.com](http://www.winchestermysteryhouse.com)).

Another allegedly haunted visitor attraction, the Museum of Shadows in Omaha, Nebraska, offers a live webcam feed – for a fee – allowing eagle-eyed ghost-hunters to scan the shadows for spooky goings on. The museum claims to hold "Over 3,000 verified haunted objects" from around the world, and visitors have reported seeing apparitions, hearing voices, physical sensations and poltergeist activity within the museum. During normal opening hours they offer ghost hunts through the collections or the opportunity to spend 10 minutes alone in a darkened room with a cursed object. What's more, if you're troubled by a haunted item in your own home, you can send it to the museum where they will quarantine it before moving it to secure storage, out of harms' way ([www.museumofshadows.com](http://www.museumofshadows.com)).

### UFOLOGY

Unfortunately, I failed to hack into the security camera system

of Area 51 so I can't give you a link to a live feed from the extraterrestrial research labs. I think the next best option is the live feed from the International Space Station ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDU-rZs-Ic4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDU-rZs-Ic4)). You get a beautifully clear and crisp view of Earth from space, which should show any aliens trying to sneak up on us – although the feed does periodically revert to recorded material when the station goes out of range. In fact, several clips from the ISS cameras currently circulating online are said to show alien craft approaching Earth, but I'll let you make your own judgements on those. Personally, I find just watching our little blue oasis gently turning in space is a wonderfully sobering and calming experience.

Back on terra firma, one of the oldest established extraterrestrial contactee groups, the Aetherius Society (FT104:49, 173:26, 271:52), is proving to be one of the most skilful at adopting new technology to share their message of universal spiritual harmony. Since Covid-19 disrupted regular operations, they've been live-streaming services from their temples in London and Los Angeles – but only those with the initiative to





**ABOVE LEFT:** Some of the intriguing carvings in Royston Cave, Hertfordshire. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Margate's mysterious Shell Grotto. **BELOW:** A witch bottle on display at Boscastle's famous Museum of Witchcraft and Magic.

seek out the correct password can access the broadcasts from [www.aetherius.org](http://www.aetherius.org).

A few years ago, the Hessdalen Lights of central Norway caused excitement among UFO and Earth Mysteries communities (**FT103:26-31; 189:30; 204:29; 218:42-48, 316:26**). Now the excitement has died down a little, but the curious and unexplained glowing orbs still occur from time to time. You can access livestream video from the valley via [www.hessdalen.org](http://www.hessdalen.org), but don't expect a spectacular *son et lumière*. You'll have plenty of time staring into the blackness to formulate your own theories about the origins of this curious phenomenon.

For a more reliable lightshow, several websites give access to cameras streaming the Aurora Borealis or Aurora Australis, and there are apps and social media groups to alert you when a good display is in progress. One reliable example can be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/y5m8ds2a>, and you can find information about others at <https://auroranotify.com/aurora-links/>. You might even spot some unexplained aerial phenomena while you're aurora-watching.

### MYSTERIOUS PLACES

Some mysteries are just too beautiful to be pinned down by explanations and I'm delighted that four of my favorites can be explored online.

Whether it's an ancient temple, an occult clubhouse or



a Georgian folly, the Margate shell grotto (**FT230:76-77**) is an astonishing creation of delicate beauty. I can find no official online tours but you can get a reasonably good taster of it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wVA9UwpYpE>.

Royston cave (**FT193:28-30, 259:42**) is a similarly undated subterranean work of art but in a somewhat different style. There's a splendid interactive 3D model at [www.roystoncave.co.uk/post/virtual-experience](http://www.roystoncave.co.uk/post/virtual-experience).

As you'll have guessed, I'm a bit of a troglophile, so I have to mention Creswell Crags (**FT392:36-43**). They've created a high-quality 3D virtual model of their caverns, including details of the extensive "witch marks" graffiti. At time of writing, it wasn't available for users to

navigate their own tours, but there's a pre-recorded fly-through at <https://tinyurl.com/y2oy2mfj>.

The champion of all architectural mysteries has to be Rosslyn Chapel (**FT167:50**) and with the help of a 360° tour at [www.rodedwards.com/interactive-files/Rosslyn\\_Chapel](http://www.rodedwards.com/interactive-files/Rosslyn_Chapel) you can contemplate the mysteries of the Holy Grail or work on a new Hollywood blockbuster.

All these sites need lots of care and maintenance to keep them in good condition for future fortune-tellers to enjoy, so when conditions permit, please think about helping them out with a real-world donation.

### CABINETS OF CURIOSITY

I can't complete this feature without mentioning a few museum collections, some big and some small, which never fail to surprise and delight me.

Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum of Ethnology is a treasure trove which can be virtually explored in great detail at <https://tinyurl.com/v7ofx89>. The collection of shrunken heads is always worth a look, but my personal highlight is the glass bottle which must never be opened because it contains the trapped spirit of a witch. Yes, really.

And speaking of witches, Boscastle's Museum of Witchcraft and Magic (**FT348:34-39**) is worth a virtual visit. Although it doesn't have 360° tours or walk-throughs, it has very good photo galleries from

current and former exhibitions, as well as a thoroughly catalogued collection which can be searched online (<https://museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk/>).

The medical and anatomical collections of Philadelphia's Mutter Museum, (<http://memento.muttermuseum.org>) London's Hunterian Museum (<http://surgicat.rcseng.ac.uk/>) and the Surgeon's Hall museums at Edinburgh University (<https://museum.rcsed.ac.uk>) offer a thought-provoking if slightly grisly way to explore what it means to be human. Philadelphia has the most user-friendly online offer, but the others are well worth digging into.

London's Natural History Museum ([www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/our-work/digital-collections.html](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/our-science/our-work/digital-collections.html)) and the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC (<https://naturalhistory.si.edu/visit/virtual-tour>) offer very good virtual tours to discover the curiosities of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms.

And, of course, the British Museum, home of bog bodies, scrying stones, Mayan Calendars and Egyptian spells, is a must-visit for every fortune-teller. Its virtual tours can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/yb4s8orn>.

Happy virtual travels!

♦ **LISA GLEDHILL** is a film maker and writer with a long-standing interest in fortune-telling. She is a regular contributor to *FT*.

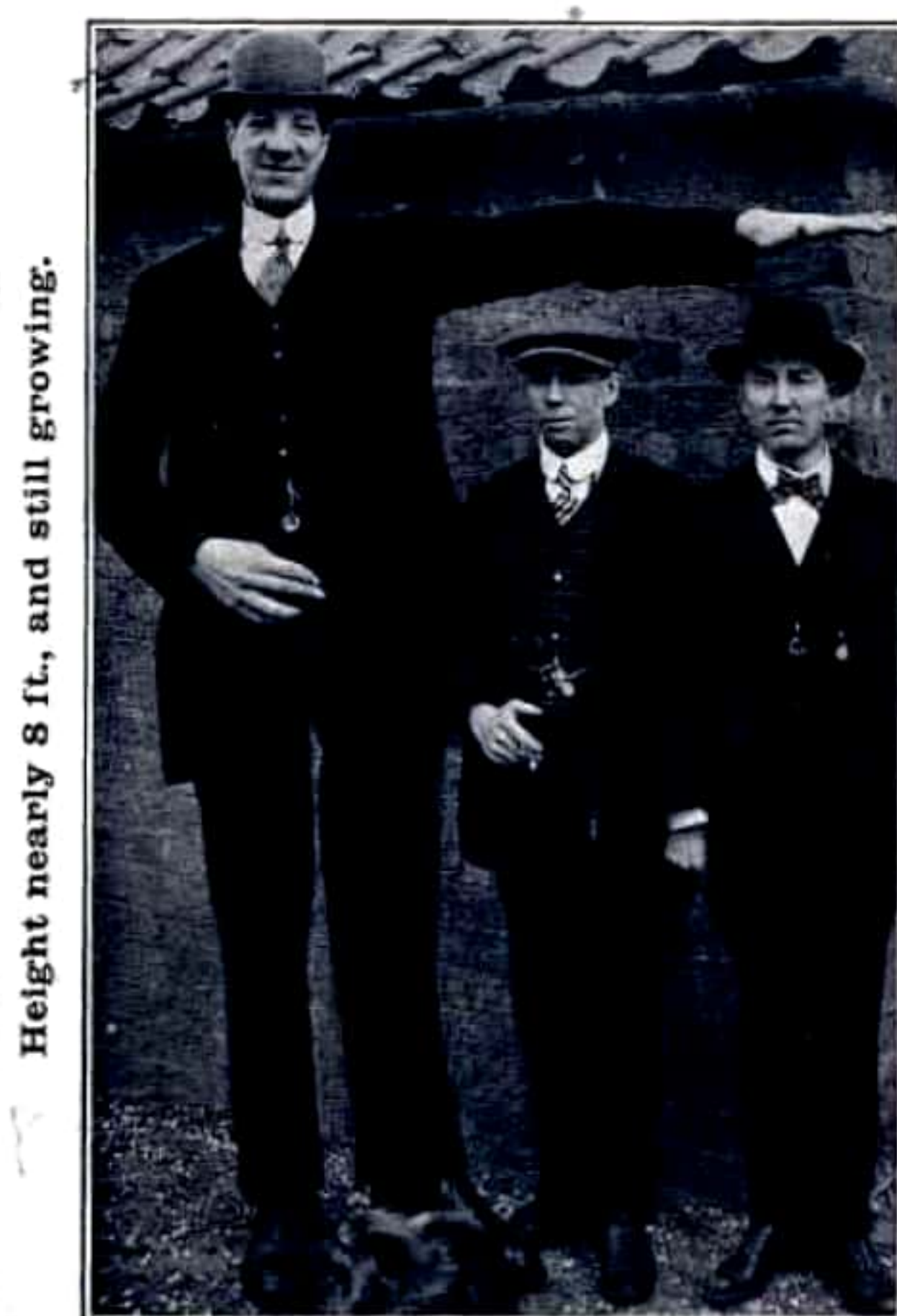


# PECULIAR POSTCARDS

**JAN BONDESON** shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past tells the story of Fred Kempster, the English giant who just wouldn't stop growing



## 11. FREDERICK THE GREAT



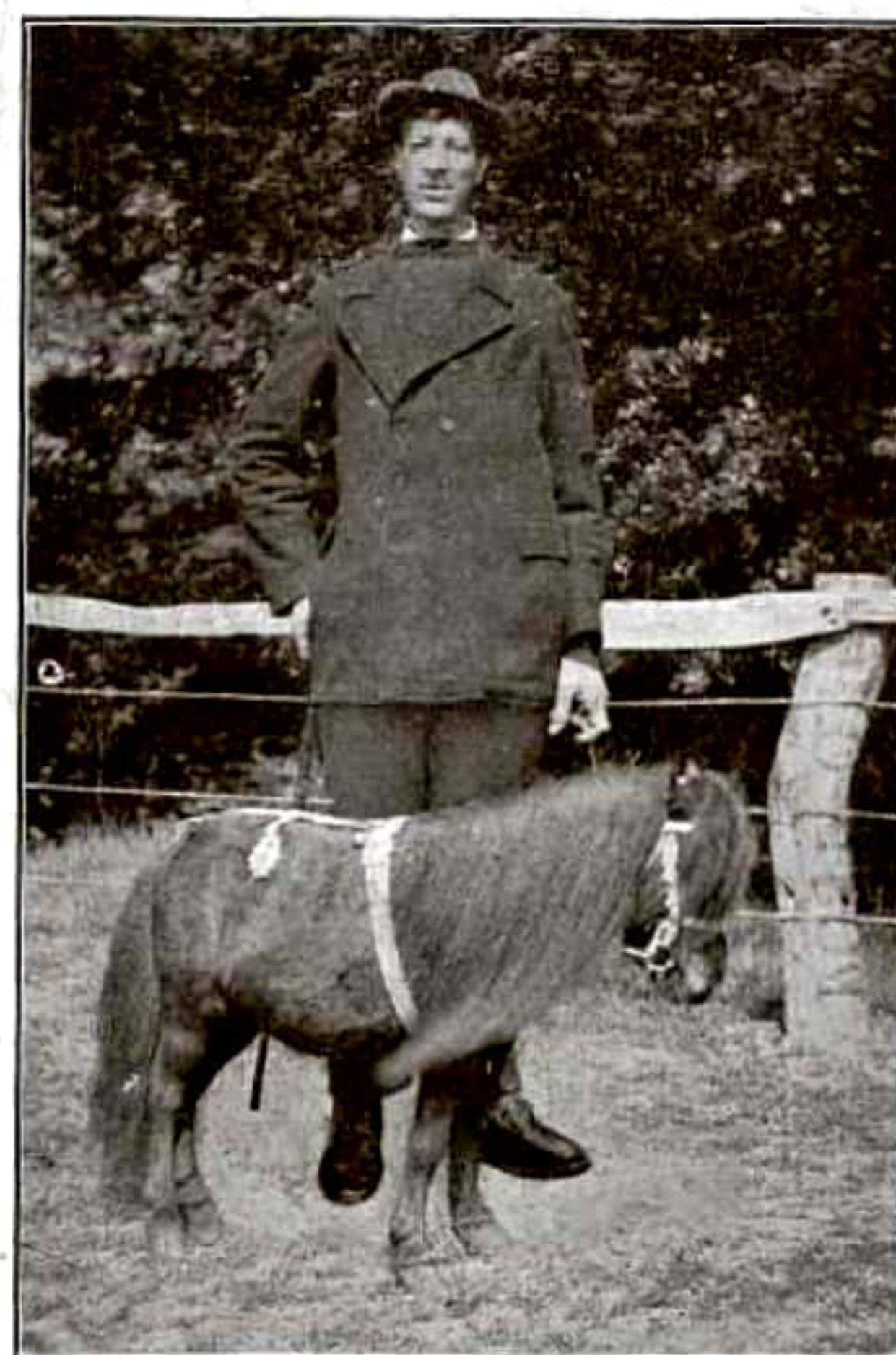
Height nearly 8 ft., and still growing.

Weight over 22 stone.

### FREDERICK THE GREAT THE ENGLISH GIANT.

Born at Bayswater.

Age 19.



FRED KEMPSTER, The English Giant,  
Age 19 Years, and his Midget Horse.

ABOVE LEFT: Frederick the Great on show. ABOVE LEFT: Fred with his midget horse. BELOW: A postcard advertising Barnardo's, where Fred had spent part of his unhappy youth, stamped and posted in 1922.

Frederick John Kempster was born in the London suburb of Bayswater in 1889, the second youngest boy in a large family. On Christmas Day 1897, his father, the milkman Joseph Kempster, died of asthma and bronchitis aged just 50, and his mother soon struggled to support her children. In September 1898, Fred and his younger brother George were placed in the care of Barnardo's orphanage, and were soon sent to Canada to fend for themselves as servants or farm labourers. It was in Manitoba that Fred started growing prodigiously. In 1904, he was returned to England since he was incapable of farm labour due to weakness of the knees. Barnardo's paid for an operation, but it had little effect, and the young giant became lame in his left leg and had to wear a special

support shoe. In 1905, he was set to work at Barnardo's Youth Labour House in the Commercial Road, where he learnt to become a basket maker.

The postcards of Fred reproduced here show that by 1908 or 1909, when he was just 19 years old, he had begun a showbusiness career, touring Britain to be exhibited in sideshows. In May 1911, when he took part in a parade of giants at the Festival of Empire, held at the Crystal Palace to celebrate the coronation of George V, he stood 7ft 3in (220cm) in his stockinged feet, and was the most impressive giant on show. By this time, his daytime employment as a basket maker was at Barnardo's Garden City for Boys at Woodford in Essex. The following month, he joined Astley's American Circus and



went on an extended tour of Britain. While not on tour, he lived with his sister Susan in Essex or his sister Ruth in Bath.

In 1912 or 1913, Fred went on tour in Germany, billed as 'Frederick the Great, the English

Giant'. By this time, he was more than 7ft 9in (236cm) tall. In March 1914, he returned to Germany, being exhibited with Brunhilde the German Giantess, some midgets, and the legless dwarf Mr Goy. The tour was still on at the outbreak of the Great War, but on 1 August the Polizei came to call, ordering all German and Austrian performers to the barracks, leaving five people – the American manager Otto Heineman, Mr Goy the dwarf and his wife and attendant, and Fred himself – to be interned. In late September, when the Germans had deported these undesirable aliens to Holland, Fred gave interviews to the London newspapers about his wartime ordeal. He volunteered to join the Army, but he was turned down due to his gigantic stature and indifferent health. In September 1916, he was on show in Sheffield from 2pm until 10pm each day; admission cost two pence, although wounded soldiers could see him for free.

Fred then spent a year at the National Hospital for the Paralysed and Epileptic in Queen Square, with an unspecified nervous complaint. Once, the hungry giant inadvertently ate 17 large sandwiches, the ration for the entire hospital ward, before asking the sister for some cake. When he was exhibited in Blackburn, he contracted influenza, and he died from pneumonia on 15 April 1918, aged just 29. He was 8ft 4in (254cm) tall at the time of his death. The 9ft- (274cm) coffin had to be removed from the hotel where he had been staying through the window and transported to the cemetery in a hearse lacking its rear panel; after ten tonnes of earth had been excavated from the 10ft- (3m) long grave, it took 14 strong men to lower the coffin into it.

This is an edited extract from Jan Bondeson's book *The Lion Boy and Other Medical Curiosities* (Amberley Publishing, Stroud 2018).



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# WHY FORTEAN?



**FORTEAN TIMES** is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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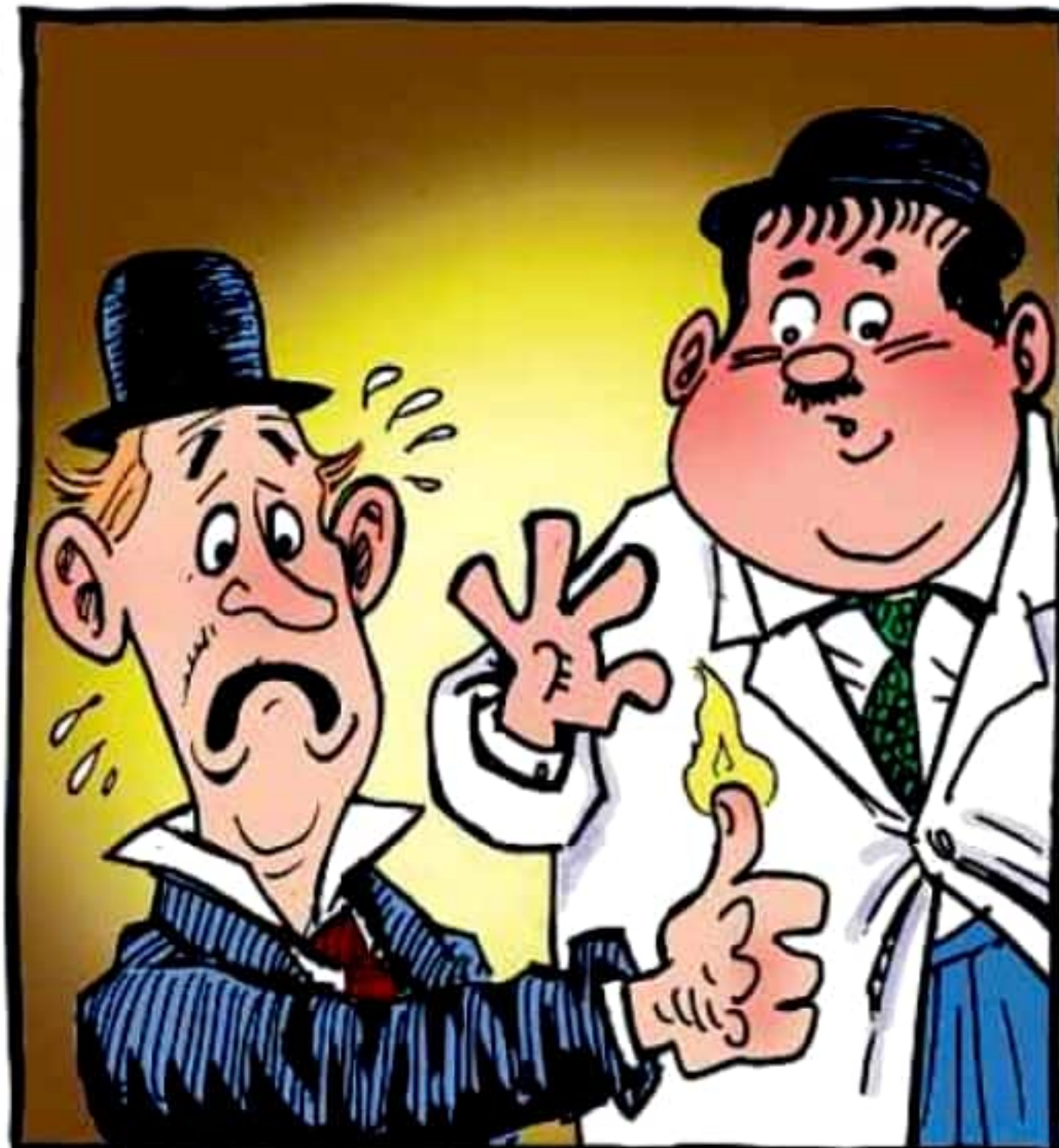
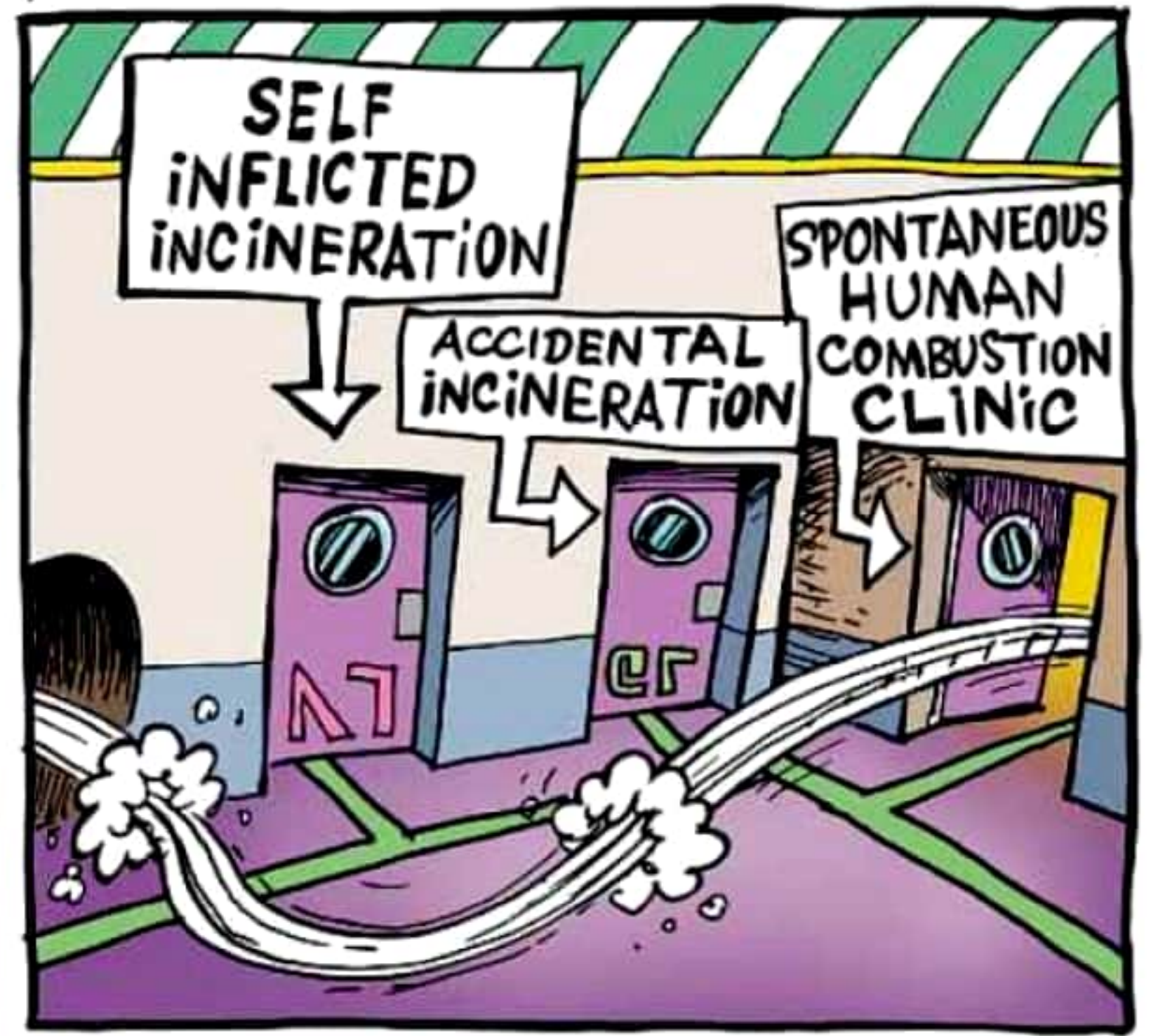
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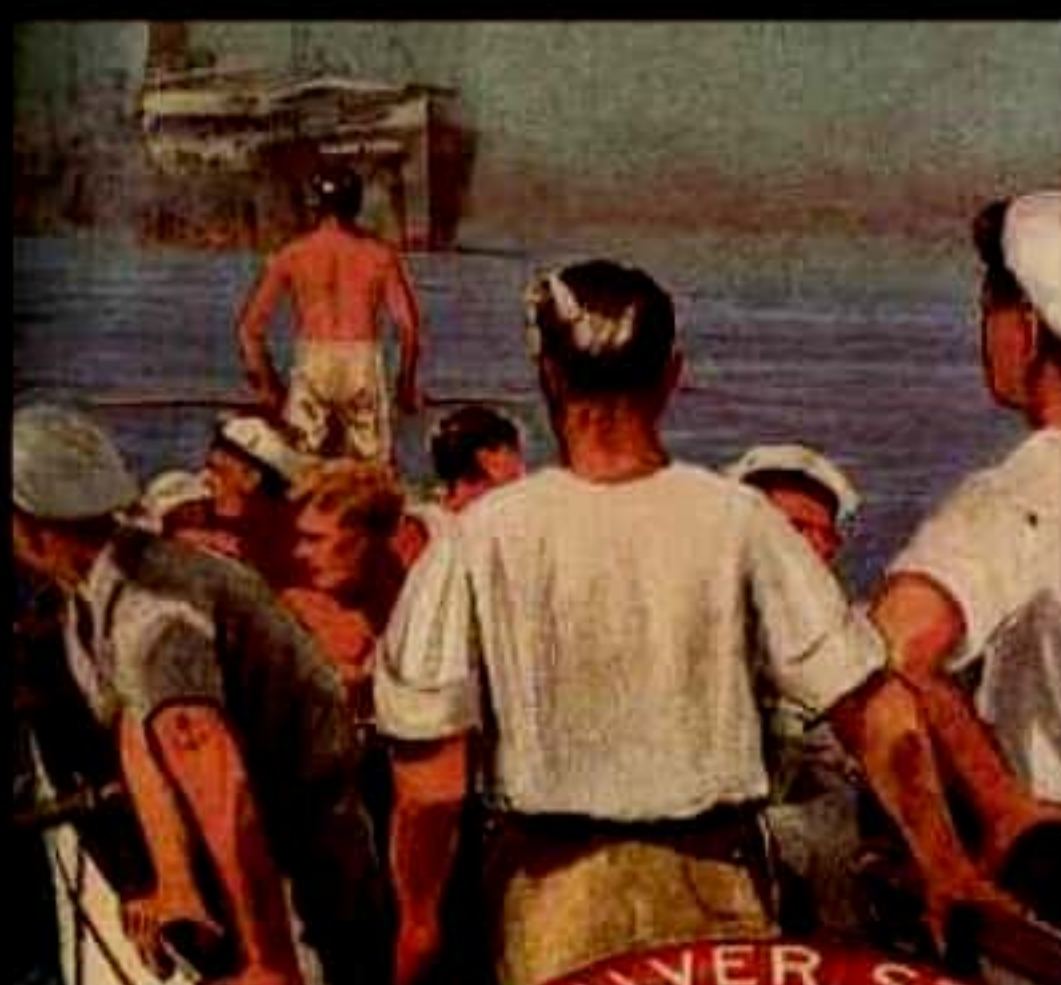
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# FORTEAN TIMES 402

ON SALE 28 JAN 2021

# STRANGE DEATHS

## UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

A Philippine village's police chief was killed when he raided an illegal cockfight and a razor-sharp metal blade worn by the birds severed his femoral artery. Authorities in Northern Samar province have been clamping down on cockfight gatherings. Cockfighting is popular in many rural areas of the Philippines. Some fights are licensed and legal, while others are not. However, all such events are currently prohibited in an attempt to control the spread of Covid-19.

Chief Lieutenant Christian Bolok, who was in his mid-30s, was trying to confiscate the roosters. He grabbed a cockerel, but when one of its gaffs (the steel blades attached to its legs) severed his artery, he bled to death. Attempts were made to stem the blood loss with a tourniquet but were unsuccessful. Police arrested three farmers who had been participating in the illegal fight, and seized seven cockerels, a pair of gaffs and 550 pesos (£8) in cash. *Guardian*, 28 Oct 2020.

Daniel Schwarz, 44, and Ashley Schwarz, 34, of Odessa, Texas, were charged with murder after allegedly forcing an eight-year-old girl to jump on a hot trampoline for an extended period of time until she collapsed. The incident took place in late August; investigators believe the victim was not allowed to eat breakfast or drink any water. The trampoline's temperature was measured at 110°F (49°C) and the ground temperature at 150°F (66°C). An autopsy listed the girl's cause of death as dehydration. *news4sanantonio.com*, 14 Oct 2020.

After finding a leg bone bearing teeth marks and other human remains in a Berlin park, German police have arrested a 41-year-old secondary school maths and chemistry teacher on suspicion of murder with sexual motives. A spokesman for the Berlin prosecutors' office said: "The suspect had an interest in cannibalism. He searched online for the topic." The man was detained at his home in the north of Berlin, close to the park where the remains were found. Police say they found knives, a bone cutting saw commonly used by surgeons and a large cooler, as well as 50lb (22kg) of sodium hydroxide, which can be used to dissolve flesh and body tissue. The suspect told police he had intended to make soap.

The victim has been identified as Stephen T, a 44-year-old high-voltage lineman who disappeared from his Lichtenberg apartment on 5 September having told his roommate he was going to meet a friend. The prosecutor's spokesman said it was unclear whether the victim also had an interest in cannibalism. The suspect and victim had met in a chatroom on the gay dating site Planet Romeo.

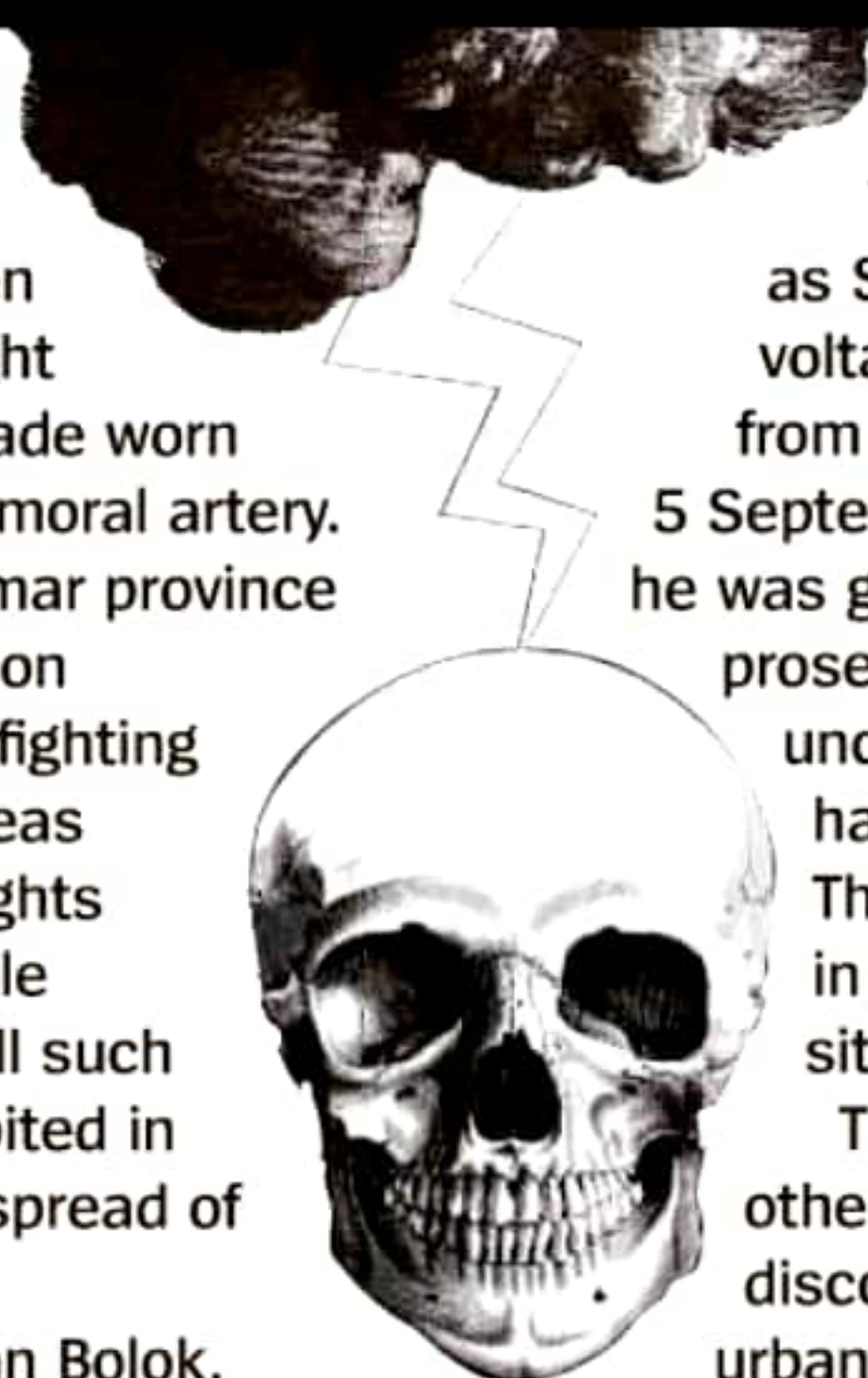
The flesh-free leg bone and other skeletal remains were discovered on 8 November by an urban trekker. Police initially thought the bite marks on the bones had been made by an animal, but after further investigation changed their opinion.

In 2015, a German police officer was convicted of murdering a man he had met on an Internet chat forum dedicated to cannibalism. Prosecutors said the victim had fantasised about being eaten, but there was no evidence this had actually taken place (FT313:14). And in 2006, the Rotenburg cannibal Armin Meiwes, a computer repair man, was convicted of killing and eating a man he had met online, after he and his victim had jointly attempted to eat the victim's severed penis. Meiwes is currently serving a life sentence (FT169:12, 182:22-23). *irishexaminer.com*, *thedailybeast.com*, *BBC News*, 20 Nov 2020.

50-year-old Jose Fuentes was crossing a street in the South Los Angeles neighbourhood of Florence one November evening when he was struck and killed by three separate hit-and-run drivers. All three fled the scene after colliding with him. Police appealed for witnesses who might help them find the perpetrators.

A motorcycle was the first vehicle to hit Mr Fuentes, leaving him lying in the road. A CCTV video showed the motorcyclist speeding away. Seconds later he was struck by a white sedan, which also fled the scene. He was subsequently hit a third time by a second car.

"Nobody stopped and helped out Mr Fuentes as he lay there," said LAPD Detective Ryan Moreno. "The guy on the motorcycle, he kind of went out onto the street, maybe [he could have] stopped to block traffic and prevented even the second or third collision from happening. But he elected to get on his motorcycle and took off and left and fled the scene." *abc7news.com*, 25 Nov; *Sun*, 26 Nov 2020.





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